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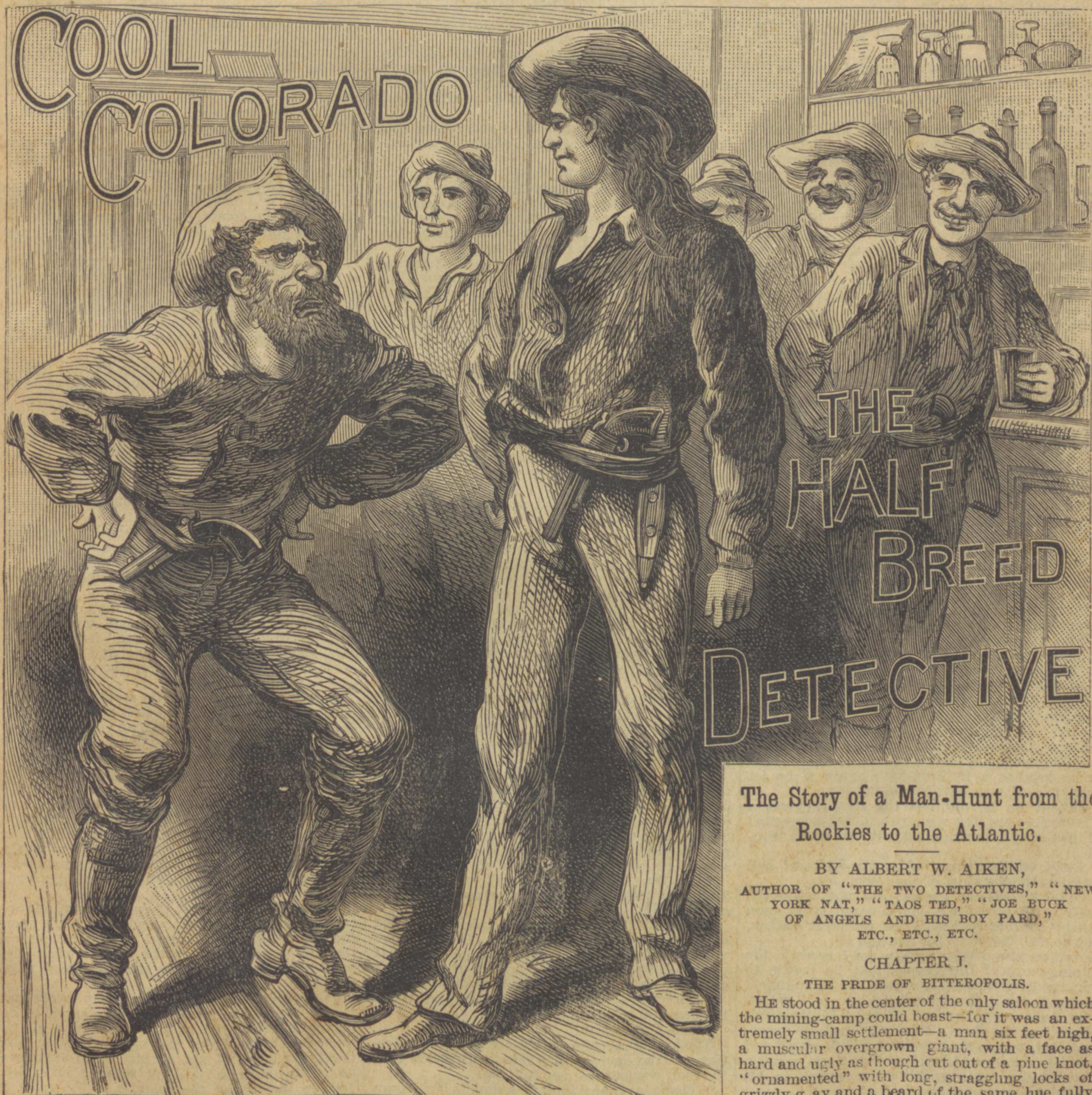
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"I'M A GRIZZLY B'AR FROM MY HEAD TO MY HEELS; SO, MISTER COLORADO, COOL OR HOT, I'M YER CHICKEN!"

The Story of a Man-Hunt from the
Rockies to the Atlantic.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE TWO DETECTIVES," "NEW
YORK NAT," "TAOS TED," "JOE BUCK
OF ANGELS AND HIS BOY PARD,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRIDE OF BITTEROPOLIS.

HE stood in the center of the only saloon which the mining-camp could boast—for it was an extremely small settlement—a man six feet high, a muscular overgrown giant, with a face as hard and ugly as though cut out of a pine knot, "ornamented" with long, straggling locks of grizzly gray and a beard of the same hue fully a foot in length, and as he beat his breast with his huge fists and glared in defiance around the

room he proclaimed that he was a "chief," prepared to make it extremely lively for any one who felt inclined to dispute his right to the title.

It is of the little mining-camp of Bitteropolis we write.

A small settlement on the head-waters of Bitter Creek, one of the tributaries of the Gunnison River, in great mineral State of Colorado.

The speaker was a new-comer; only a week had he tarried in the mining-camp, but during that brief time he had contrived to bring himself as prominently before the public as any man who had ever "struck the town."

Bill Jackson he had proclaimed his name to be, and he had significantly added that he was generally termed Bad Bill Jackson, and he "reckoned" the name fitted him mighty well.

The advent of this man into the mining-camp created considerable talk, for with the stranger came a young and pretty girl, one of the robust, blooming beauties, which are only to be encountered in rural regions—no delicate city flower.

"My darter, Polly," was Bad Bill Jackson's introductions, "and she takes arter her dad too," he continued. "She kin whip her weight in wild-cats and kin hug a bear to death!"

The girl's name was Pauline, as was soon discovered, but as this was too "high-flown" to suit the burly miner, he never called her anything but Polly.

The stranger was a fore-handed man, as the saying is, as was proved by the fact that shortly after his arrival he purchased one of the best "claims" in the district.

The average miner is usually willing to sell when he can get his price, for he is not content with a fair-paying claim, but is always ready to change, in the hope that in a new field he may be able to strike a bonanza, which will make him rich in a hurry.

As we have said, the advent of the blooming, buxom Polly created a deal of excitement, for out of the hundred souls settled in and near Bitter Creek Valley, there were only ten women, mostly old, ugly and married, and of the damsels who were still in the market, no one of them could compare with Polly Jackson.

Right in the beginning though, old Jackson, as the boys disrespectfully termed him, threw a wet blanket on any sweethearting as far as his daughter was concerned, for when one of the young miners, thinking to get on the right side of the father invited him to take a drink, and remarked that his "gal" was the "finest looking piece of calico in Colorado," the old man responded that there wasn't the least doubt about it, but he wanted it understood "right to onc't," that he didn't propose to have any sap-headed fools chinning round his darter, and if any galoot dared to even look sideways at the gal, he should consider it his duty to whale him so badly that he wouldn't want to "take a squint at any other female for a year."

Now, the miner to whom this observation was addressed was a big fellow, and counted to be as good a man as there was in the camp.

Both the words and the manner of the new-comer excited his anger.

"So, afore a man kin come arter your darter he has got to climb you?" he queried.

"Stranger, you hit the nail on the head the first lick that time!" Jackson remarked.

"And I reckon there ain't a man in the town who kin do the job, big or little, old or young!" the old man continued.

There was quite a little crowd in the saloon and the young man felt that he could never hold up his head as a fighting-man again if he let such "dare" pass without taking it up.

Take it up he did, but the stranger was a "horse," to use the westernism, and succeeded in thrashing his antagonist without much trouble.

And from that time "old man Jackson" had posed as the big chief of the town.

Of course the one contest did not settle the matter, for at least a half-a-dozen other men tried "conclusions" with the muscular father, but he was too much for one and all.

And on the evening when we introduce the mining-camp of Bitteropolis and its people to our readers, old man Jackson having indulged pretty freely in the potent "fire-water" which was dealt over the bar of the "Millionaire's Home," as the shanty hotel was grandiloquently called, was in the mood for a difficulty and publicly expressed his regret that there wasn't a man in the camp with "sand enough in his craw," to encounter him.

But the miners were really afraid of the boaster. Understand, we speak of the men who were inclined to go upon the war-path, for this

isolated camp did not differ much from the usual mining settlement.

Out of the seventy odd men who claimed a home in the valley, there were ten or fifteen who prided themselves upon their physical powers and were generally ready to indulge in a fight upon the slightest provocation.

But the rest of the male inhabitants of the town were as peaceable and law-abiding as the ordinary countryman.

So, when "Bad Man Jackson" proclaimed that he was a chief and lamented that there wasn't a man in the town who had the sand to face him, he referred to these chaps who had set themselves up as fighting-men, for Jackson did not go out of his way to force a quarrel upon any one.

"All he did was to proclaim that he was the best man in the camp, and if the statement was not objected to, he did not try to force any one to fight with him.

There were quite a number of the recognized fighting-men of the camp in the saloon on this particular occasion, and although they were extremely disgusted by the vigorous "crowing" of the new-comer, yet none of them felt inclined to take up the dare.

The stranger had whipped some of the best men in the camp, and those who had not tested his prowess were rather shy of making the attempt.

"Oh, come, this hyer won't do!" Jackson ejaculated. "I will have to emigrate and locate in some other camp whar thar are some rustlers, and I kin scare up a leetle amusement once in a while.

"An' I want you galoots to understand that it is a sure enuff thing w'ot I sed 'bout my darter, too.

"No two-legged man in this hyer camp kin come a-sparking of my gal until he has downed me in a fair fight, so if any of you boyees hev an idee that you would like to come sneaking around my ranch, you must wade into me, 'cos I'm the Pride of Bitteropolis, I am!"

"Oh, come now, old man, let up!" exclaimed the landlord of the Millionaires' Home, Ben Perkins by name, a lean and scrawny Yankee from "away down East."

"Don't you crow so loud, for the fu'st thing you know some fellow will come along who will warm you like all git out!"

The landlord was a privileged character, and generally spoke his mind pretty freely without being called to an account by any one for so doing.

As the provider of liquid refreshments, he could give or refuse credit, a mighty matter to a man who was thirsty for a drink and yet without cash in his pocket to pay for it.

"That is just the kind of a man I am really hungry to see; so, landlord, for the love of goodness trot him out as soon as you kin!" Bad Man Jackson exclaimed.

"But I say, whar is the critter hiding? Does he sagaciate in this hyer camp, or will will you hev to send to another town for him?"

The speaker threw a fine expression of sarcasm into the remark and some few of the men present felt called upon to snicker.

These were fellows whose credit was so bad that they knew they never could hope to receive any favors from Perkins and so felt independent.

The landlord racked his brain for a moment and then a bright idea came to him.

"Wa-al, there's one man in this deestrick who could fix your flint all right, I calculate, and not have to half try either!" he replied.

All the bystanders listened attentively, at the same time wondering who it was that the landlord had in his mind.

"Whar is the cuss?" old Jackson demanded. "Trot him out as soon as you kin and see him put his tail between his legs and sneek away as soon as he hears my war-horn a-blowing!"

"Oh, yes, the critter I speak of is jest the kind of a man to do that!" Perkins exclaimed, sarcastically.

"He's jest the kind of man to play yaller-dog and run, but I tell you what it is, old man, when you come face to face with this gen'leman, if you don't want to hunt yer hole then you ain't got as much sense as I give you credit for."

"Show!" cried the other in contempt, "w'ot's the name of this man-eater?"

"Cool Colorado!"

The hum that rose on the air and the expression on the faces of the miners revealed that the man was no stranger to them.

"That's a funny kind of a handle," old man Jackson growled.

"W'ot kind of a varmint is he, anyway?"

"A half-breed; the son of a Pawnee woman,

and they do say that Wild Bill was his father; I calculate that it is likely it was so, for the young feller is a whirlwind when he gits started, jest as Wild Bill used for to be.

"He's called Cool Colorado, 'cos he is cool by nater and is a native of this State."

"Does he live in this yere camp?"

"'Bout five miles off; he and his pard, an old man named Alex Williams, are working a claim up on Pine Creek."

"Send for him to onc't so I kin chaw him up!" the boaster cried.

CHAPTER II.

PRIDE HAS A FALL.

"OHO, I calculate you wouldn't talk that way if you once got a look at Cool Colorado so as to be able to see jest what kind of a man he is," the landlord remarked.

"Wal, now, you kin jest bet yer bottom dollar that I am the critter w'ot kin make him take water, an' I don't keer two wags of a mule's tail w'ot kind of a man he is!" old Jackson cried, defiantly.

"W'ot sort of an elephant is he, anyway? Is he bigger'n a house an' stronger than a buffler bull, 'cos that is the only kind of a galoot able to make a man of my size 'crawfish worth a cent!"

"Oh, no, he ain't so very big, but what there is of him is all there," the landlord answered.

"And he's a mighty quiet and peaceable feller, too, not one of the kind to go ranting and roaring 'bout the camp sp'iling for a fight, but when he gits roused and wades in, the man who is in his way has got to keep his eyes peeled!"

"That's so, that's so!" came in assent from a half-dozen of the bystanders.

"Oh, for the love of money send for him so as to give me a chance to smash him once or twice!" the Pride of Bitteropolis roared.

"I will go you four dollars to a slap in the face that I will make him hunt his hole five minutes arter him comes face to face with me, so fast that you won't be able to see his heels for dust!"

"Oh! I am jist longing to get him in my grip so as to gi'n him a hug that will make him think a b'ar is squeezing him to death, for that is the kind of man I am, and don't you forget it!"

Hardly had the arrogant words left his lips when the door opened and a young man entered the saloon.

A deep hush fell upon the room, and almost every man in it stared open-mouthed at the new-comer.

Old man Jackson, who was remarkably quick of apprehension, noticed the strange look upon the faces of the miners, caused without the least doubt by the unexpected appearance of the young man, and so he took a good look at him; but, as far as he could see, there wasn't anything about the stranger to make the others stare at him.

The new-comer was a stoutly-built young man with an appearance which seemed to give great promise of uncommon physical strength.

He was dressed in the usual rough garments worn by miners on the border, but of rather better quality than the average man affords.

His face though was a strange one, dark in hue, massive, strongly-marked features, his hair, black as the raven's wing and worn long, brushed behind his ears, after the fashion common to many of the scouts.

A close observer, used to the study of mankind, would have decided at the first glance that the new-comer was no common man.

But old man Jackson was not a good judge of his fellows, and the thought that the stranger was a man of uncommon strength and ability never occurred to him.

In fact, the main impression that he had of the new-comer was that he was a jack-a-dandy, as he would have expressed it, because his hair was carefully arranged; for the bluff and burly boaster had a supreme contempt for a man who paid any particular attention to his personal appearance.

From the dark face of the new-comer, as well as from the sudden hush which had come upon the room, Jackson jumped to the conclusion that the new-comer was the man of whom the saloon-keeper had spoken, the half-breed, Cool Colorado.

Jackson had been drinking pretty freely and was just in the mood for a quarrel, so he promptly cried, "Boyees, I want you all to understand that I am the biggest man in this town, bar none! I am a chief, and I am allers on the war-path, an' it don't make a bit of difference to me w'ot the color is of the man I tackle, white or black or red—mebbe I like a copper-colored cuss for to climb better nor any other kind!"

And as he uttered the defiant speech he placed his arms against his sides and glared in the face of the stranger.

That the speech was intended for the other was plain, and he must have been a dull fellow indeed to misunderstand the meaning of the burly blusterer.

"Stranger, I suppose you intend your remarks for me," the young man observed, "but I am not the kind of a man to allow myself to be drawn into a quarrel with every fellow who is anxious to display his abilities as a fighter."

"Hain't you Cool Colorado?"

"That is my handle."

"An' I've heerd that you was a war-hoss, and no mistake! Now, I want you to understand that I am the big bazoo of this hyer camp, able for to knock down an' drag out ary man in it. My name is fight, and I'm a grizzly b'ar from my head to my heels; so, Mister Colorado, cool or hot, I'm yer chicken!"

"Well, I reckon I can hold my own if I am forced into a difficulty," the young man replied; "but I am no bar-room brawler, eager to fight for the sake of fighting, and I don't care to quarrel with the first man I encounter just because he thinks he is called upon to go on the war-path."

"Say! you don't seem to understand the way things ar!" Jackson exclaimed. "I ain't been long in these parts, an' that is the reason why I hain't run ag'in' you before; but I am a-runnin' this camp, I am, an' these fellers hyer, who are afeard for to come out an' face me, hev been throwing a chap 'bout your size up in my teeth, an' now you hev put in an appearance, it seems to me that you ought to try a go with me jest for to let the camp see who is the best man."

"I don't care the toss of a cent for the opinion of the camp!" Cool Colorado exclaimed, bluntly.

"For the love of massy, stranger, jest have a go with me, jest for greens!" cried Jackson, appealingly. "Say, mebbe you don't know that I hev got one of the nicest gals in the town—my darter! Why, stranger, she's a beauty, now I tell you, an' all the boyees in the town are jest wild fur to have a chance to make her acquaintance; but I hev said right out to them that nary man in this town will have ary chance to do ary chinnin' with my gal until he has shown he is a better man than I am."

"Do you live on the north road?"

"You bet."

"Well, I reckon I have had the pleasure of making your daughter's acquaintance, then."

"The blazes you have!" growled the burly fellow, in rising wrath.

"Yes; as I came along the trail she happened to come to the door, and when I saw what a blooming beauty she was, the thought suddenly occurred to me that I was mighty thirsty, and so I made bold to ask her for a drink of water."

"Darn yer impudence!" exclaimed the enraged father.

"She, of course, was glad to oblige a good-looking gentleman like myself, and we had a nice little chat together; she told me her name was Pauline Jackson, usually called Polly for short, and that she lived in the cabin with her father, who she said I would be apt to meet in the Millionaire's Home."

"Wa-al, cuss me if your impudence don't beat anything that I ever heered tell on!" cried old man Jackson, who had worked himself up into a terrible fit of rage.

"Now you hev got to fight or be 'tarnelly chawed up!"

Then, brandishing his arms, he rushed at the half-breed.

But he found Cool Colorado prepared for the attack though, for, bracing himself firmly, the half-breed clinched with his antagonist, neither one attempting to strike a blow.

Over the floor, backward and forward, swayed the two men, while the bystanders watched the contest with eager interest.

From the beginning it was apparent to the lookers-on that the half-breed was the best man of the two, although Jackson appeared to be the largest.

But Cool Colorado was fully as strong as his opponent, and what he lacked in size he made up in skill.

Jackson depended entirely upon brute force, while the half-breed was skilled in the tricks of the wrestler's art.

For fully a minute the two struggled, the old man endeavoring with a bear-like hug to squeeze the breath out of his opponent, while Cool Colorado's game was to get a "lock" upon his antagonist, so as to throw him heavily.

Twice the trick nearly succeeded, but just be-

fore the critical moment was reached, Jackson, by instinct, seemed to guess he was in danger, and managed to wriggle out of the clutch.

But on the third attempt the half-breed succeeded.

Just how the thing was worked neither Jackson nor any of the bystanders could tell, but, by a dextrous twist, Jackson was lifted from his feet, held for a moment on the hip of his opponent and then flung with terrific force to the floor, his head striking first with a thud which was heard all over the room.

The concussion stunned the old man and he lay like a log.

A long breath came from the lips of the bystanders, and then they yelled with delight, for there wasn't a man in the room who wasn't glad to see the boaster conquered.

"Hope to goodness he ain't killed," the landlord observed.

"Oh, no; no danger of it," Cool Colorado replied. "His head is too hard to mind a little crack like that."

It was soon apparent that the half-breed was correct for almost immediately Jackson began to recover consciousness.

In a moment or two he sat up, then looked around him in a dazed sort of way as if he did not exactly understand what had occurred.

But when his gaze fell upon Cool Colorado, standing with his muscular arms folded across his brawny breast, the truth immediately flashed upon him.

Slowly he rose to his feet, shook his head as though he didn't know what to make of it, but manifested no intention of renewing the contest.

"I am ready whenever you are," the half-breed observed.

"Oh, no; no more in mine, thank you. I'm no hog. I allers know when I've got enuff; you are a better man than I am, an' when you are 'round I'll lay low. I bear no malice though."

And in proof of this Jackson invited Cool Colorado and all present to join him in a drink, an invitation which the bystanders were glad to accept.

The half-breed, coming to town after supplies, had dropped into the saloon to hear the news.

He reported that things were booming up his way and after tarrying for an hour or so departed.

"He's a man, every inch onto him!" was old Jackson's declaration.

CHAPTER III.

THE HORSEMAN.

AFTER leaving the saloon Cool Colorado went to the store where he got the groceries which he had ordered and set out for his lonely cabin up on the head-waters of Pine Creek.

The half-breed, although he had lived all his life in Colorado, was a new-comer in this region, only having been a resident of the district for a couple of months, and the way in which he happened to join company with his present "pard," Alex Williams as he was familiarly called, was odd in the extreme.

Attracted by the stories which he had heard of the remarkable "leads" which had been discovered in the neighborhood of Bitteropolis our hero had resolved to try his fortunes in that camp.

At the time, he was in "hard luck," owing to some unfortunate mining speculations, and so was compelled to journey on foot to the new Mecca of the fortune-seekers.

Approaching the town from the north he entered the valley through which Pine Creek ran and there encountered Alex Williams.

After the sociable custom of the frontier the two entered into conversation, and the half-breed inquired in regard to the chances that Bitteropolis offered to a man who was not afraid of hard work.

Williams, who was an old, gray-headed, gray-bearded man, with a plainly perceptible air of refinement, a decided contrast to the usual miner, took a fancy to the young stranger, and after a few minutes, conversation made him a proposal to become his partner.

He had a rich claim, and not being strong, nor skilled in mining, was not able to work it as it ought to be worked.

Then too he had a constant fear that if the fact became noised about that he was making a good thing out of the lead, some ruffians would be apt to attempt to "jump the claim," that is, seize the property by force of arms.

Our hero reflected upon the matter for a few moments and then concluded to accept the offer, and so he became Alex Williams's pard.

For two months now he and the old man had

worked together and yet he knew no more of his companion than at first.

There was evidently some mystery connected with the man's past life, for he never referred to it in any way.

Cool Colorado was a quiet, reserved fellow himself—no talker, and when he discovered that his pard was averse to conversing about his past life, he never made any attempt to question him. The claim the pair worked was a rich one, and during the two months they had taken out a small fortune.

According to Cool Colorado's estimate they had nearly ten thousand dollars to the good; the gold securely hidden away.

This was against the half-breed's advice, for he thought it would be much safer to send the treasure away by the aid of the Express company, but as the old man seemed reluctant to adopt this course, the other did not insist upon it.

It was a lonely trail that Cool Colorado followed—the one which led from Bitteropolis to the isolated cabin up on Pine Creek.

After leaving the neighborhood of the camp, there was not a single house until the lonely cabin of the pair was reached.

No danger, though, was to be expected on the dreary way, for no road-agent, or kindred outlaw, had ever appeared in the neighborhood of the camp.

And there was a bright, full moon, too, so that all objects were almost as visible as by day.

One man only did the half-breed encounter after leaving the vicinity of the town, and this was at a spot midway between Pine Creek and the mining-camp, just where a trail branched off to the eastward.

It was a horseman, mounted upon a dark-chestnut steed, which was marked with three "white stockings" and a large "blaze" in the forehead.

The man was muffled in a rough, short-skirted coat, pea-jacket style, with the collar turned up around his throat, although the night could not be called a chilly one, and wore a broad-brimmed slouch hat, pulled down over his eyes, and, thanks to this precaution, coupled with the turned-up collar, but little could be seen of his face.

The horseman rode as though in haste, and as Cool Colorado did not recognize him, he took a good look at him as the stranger rode past, but owing to the way in which the rider was attired the look profited him but little.

As near as he could make out, though, the horseman was a dark, surly-looking chap, with a short, black beard.

"He rides as if he was in a hurry, and he has the appearance of a man who has been up to some mischief," Cool Colorado commented after the horseman had dashed by him, and the miner again went on his way.

He had halted for a moment so as to get a good look at the stranger.

The half-breed did not like the appearance of the unknown, and the more he reflected upon the matter, the stronger became his suspicion that the night-rider was a bird of evil omen.

Just exactly what mischief the man had been engaged in of course he could not determine.

There were a dozen or so of miners to the northward, though none of them were nearer than a quarter of a mile from the claim worked by himself and his pard.

And the moment the suspicion that the horseman had been on some evil quest occurred to him, the thought came up in his mind that perhaps the rider had been up to some deviltry in his neighborhood.

Williams was alone, an old man, and one not calculated to offer successful resistance to a robber, and there was gold enough concealed on the premises to tempt the cupidity of any ruffian.

Of course this fact was not known, for the partners had taken particular care to keep quiet in regard to the richness of their claim, and although they did not hesitate to say that they were making good wages, yet they were careful not to allow it to become known that they had struck a small-sized bonanza.

But it is one of the hardest things in the world to keep a fact of this sort secret; as has been often said, the very birds in the air seem to carry the news.

There wasn't the least doubt that there were plenty of men in the neighborhood who would not be apt to resist the temptation if they suspected that only a poor, weak old man stood between them and a rich booty.

Worried by these dark apprehensions, Cool Colorado hurried home as fast as possible.

At last he came in sight of the little cabin which he and his pard occupied, and through the chink above the door gleamed the dim light coming from the candle burning within, just as it had shone when he departed.

A weight was lifted from the mind of the half-breed.

"Thank Heaven that everything is all right and no harm has come to the old man!" Cool Colorado exclaimed, as he raised the latch of the cabin door.

But when he entered the house, a scene of horror met his eyes.

Prostrate upon the floor lay Alex Williams, weltering in his blood, while the whole back of the fireplace, where the treasure had been concealed, was ripped open.

The truth was immediately apparent to the half-breed.

The old man had been assaulted and murdered so that the gold could be stolen, and, quick as a flash, came the thought that the strange horseman had had a hand in the affair.

The outrage had been but recently committed, for as Cool Colorado knelt by the prostrate man and placed his hand upon his breast, he perceived that the body was still warm.

Then the thought flashed upon the half-breed that the man was not dead and might be revived.

Tearing open the red flannel shirt which covered the breast of the old man, he sought to ascertain the nature of the wound.

It was a knife-thrust, and Cool Colorado shook his head sadly when he saw how terrible was the wound, for his experience in such matters told him that there was little hope for the stricken man.

He resolved to do what he could, though.

There was both water and whisky in the cabin, and the half-breed hastened to bathe the brow of Williams with the water, while he forced a small quantity of the whisky down his throat.

Life had not yet fled, and soon Cool Colorado had the satisfaction of seeing the wounded man open his eyes.

Although stricken unto death, yet Williams was in full possession of his senses and able to talk.

"This is a rough deal, old pard!" Cool Colorado exclaimed.

"Yes, I have been murdered—murdered that our gold might be stolen," the old man said.

"And who did the deed?"

"A stranger who stopped to inquire the way to Bitteropolis, and as I was proceeding to direct him he suddenly stabbed me and then ransacked the cabin until he discovered the hiding place of our gold."

The half-breed thought of the horseman.

"A man with a dark beard—with a soft black hat pulled down over his eyes, and wearing a short coat like a pea-jacket!"

"Yes, that is the assassin."

"His horse was a dark chestnut with three white stockings and a bright blaze in the forehead."

"I saw no horse—the man was on foot when he came to the door."

"Yes, I see, he had his horse concealed somewhere in the neighborhood so as to aid him in escaping."

"My wound is mortal—I can feel that my life is ebbing fast away and you must avenge my cruel murder!"

"I will! I swear by all I hold sacred that I will never know rest or peace until I have hunted down the villain who has done this deed. No rest or peace until your murder is avenged!" Cool Colorado cried, with uplifted hand as though to call upon the recording angel to witness the vow.

A faint smile of satisfaction passed over the face of the wounded man.

"Another favor," he murmured, his strength evidently failing. "I have a daughter in the East, a girl just budding into womanhood, and whom I have not seen since she was a child. For her sake I have been saving my gold. I have been a bad—bad man, but for years have been repentant and led an honest life. Concealed in my money-belt is my confession. Read it and then do all you can for my child now cast upon the world without a protector."

His voice faltered—he gasped and died.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ACCUSATION.

COOL COLORADO had often come face to face with death before but never when it had appeared so dreadful as now.

For a moment he stared in the face of the

dead man, like one stunned by a heavy shock and then, rousing himself from his apathy, he proceeded to search for the money-belt.

The belt was buckled around the waist of the old man, underneath his shirt, and the half-breed found it without difficulty.

The belt was empty.

It had been slit open its whole length with a knife and the contents abstracted.

This was evidently the robber's work.

He had been in too much of a hurry to stop to unfasten the belt and had ripped it open with his knife in order to save time.

For a moment the cool and hardy miner was dumfounded.

Without the confessions of which the old man had spoken how could he carry out the wishes of his dead pard?

Then a sudden idea came to him.

On the previous day Williams had complained of not feeling well and so Cool Colorado had told him he had better knock off work and take it easy.

Therefore the old man had remained in the cabin and as the door was open the half-breed noticed that during the afternoon he was busily engaged in writing.

It might be that he was engaged in the composition of the confession of which Williams had spoken, but it seemed to Cool Colorado at the time that his pard was writing a letter.

And now that the confession had evidently been carried off by the robber-assassin the thought came to the half-breed that it was probable the old man might be writing to his daughter, and if this was so, if he could find the letter some information might be gained.

He proceeded to search but his efforts were fruitless; not a single scrap of writing could he find.

In despair he sat down by the table upon which he had carelessly cast the money-belt.

Glancing carelessly at the belt while meditating what to do next, a bit of writing traced on the inside of the belt caught his eyes.

Thinking that this might be a clew to the real name of his dead pard he hastened to examine it, for he had had a suspicion ever since he joined company with the old man that Alexander Williams was not his right appellation.

"Katherine Blarcomb, Central Islip."

So the writing ran and Cool Colorado read it aloud.

"Now what has this to do with my dead pard?" he murmured.

"Is Blarcomb his name and is this Katherine his daughter, and where the deuce is Central Islip?"

"In the East somewhere, of course, and near New York city, I suppose, for from a few unguarded expressions which the old man has dropped from time to time I have an idea that he either did business in New York or lived there once."

"Hold on though!" he exclaimed, abruptly, as a sudden remembrance flashed across his mind. "It seems to me that I heard him say once that he was born on Long Island, near New York. That is where I must look for a clew then. But the first work in hand is to pursue the murderer."

"He is mounted, while I am on foot, but if I can strike his trail, if I can't run him down in time, then I am not the man I take myself to be."

"First though I must warn the camp, for some of the boys will be sure to join me in the chase."

Just at this point the door opened suddenly and a half-a-dozen well-armed miners rushed into the cabin.

They came to a dead halt in surprise when their eyes fell upon the body of the murdered man.

"Hello, hello! there has been bloody work!" cried the foremost miner, a big, muscular fellow, known far and wide as Big-nosed Smith, to distinguish him from a couple of other Smiths in the camp who could not boast of the size of their noses.

Cool Colorado rose as the men entered the cabin, natural under the circumstances, but the new-comers took it to be a sign of fear.

"Darn me, Colorado, ef this hyer don't look mighty rough for you!" Big-nosed Smith exclaimed.

"Eh!" exclaimed our hero, astounded at the implied suspicion, "what on earth do you mean?"

"What do I mean?" cried the miner, excitedly, "why, man, look at the blood on your hands!"

And then for the first time Cool Colorado noticed this circumstance.

The explanation was simple enough though, he had stained his hands with the blood while removing the money-belt.

But before he could proceed to any explanation the cut open money-belt upon the table attracted the attention of the intruders.

"By gosh!" exclaimed another of the miners, "if thar ain't another proof of his guilt!" and he pointed to the ripped money-belt as he spoke.

"See how the money-belt has been cut open."

"Hold on, fellow-citizens, don't be so durned hasty in jumping to a conclusion!" Cool Colorado exclaimed, perceiving that he was likely to get into a bad box if he did not succeed in inducing the miners to listen to his explanation.

"How I came to have the blood on my hands is easily explained," the half-breed continued. "I have been down to Bitteropolis this evening, and when I returned, entered the cabin as usual, without the slightest suspicion that anything out of the common had happened during my absence."

"You can judge of my horror when I discovered my poor old pard stretched bleeding and apparently lifeless upon the floor."

"He wasn't dead then when you found him?" Smith asked.

"No, I fired some whisky down his throat, and he recovered sufficiently to tell me what had taken place."

"He had been assaulted by a stranger, who stopped to inquire the way to Bitteropolis, but that was only a dodge to throw my pard off his guard, for just as soon as Williams proceeded to give the information the stranger stabbed him, and then searched the cabin until he discovered the hiding-place of our gold."

"You see," and Cool Colorado pointed to where the secret hoard had been concealed.

"Wa-al, your story seems to be all squar' and above-board," Smith remarked, scratching his head, doubtfully, "but I will say to you, fair and squar', that me and my pards hyer had a notion that *you* was the man who had been up to some deviltry."

The half-breed glanced at the intruders and saw that all of them were miners who had claims further up the creek.

"Why should you suppose such a thing?" he asked in astonishment.

"Because the cabin of Barney Mulligan was broken into to-night—Barney was at home, but he had been h'isting tanglefoot with the boys, and so wasn't in any condition to make much of a fight."

"The robber hit him over the head and laid him out, but he didn't rake in much for his trouble, for Barney is too fond of benzine to ever have many ducats."

"The cuss got away with what he had though, and arter he lit out, and Barney came to his senses, on the floor, jest under his bunk, he found this knife."

Smith exhibited the weapon as he spoke.

"Now, Colorado, 'bout all the boys have an idee that this hyer is *your* knife."

The half-breed was annoyed, for there was no disputing the fact that the knife was exactly like the one he carried.

Under the circumstances it was not strange that suspicions should be directed to him.

"Well, boys, it ain't my knife, and the best proof of that is the fact that here is mine," and Cool Colorado drew his knife from his belt and extended it to the miner.

"Like as two peas!" Smith declared.

"I can put you on the track of the man who owned the knife, I reckon," said the half-breed, "and the chances are a hundred to one that the fellow who robbed Barney and the man who killed my pard are the same."

Then he told how he had encountered the strange horseman, and detailed the dying words of his pard, thus accounting for his being occupied in the examination of the money-belt when the miners had surprised him by their unexpected entrance.

That the account was correct ought to have been apparent at once, but Big-nose Smith was a bull-headed sort of a man, not renowned for his intelligence, and it was a common saying that when he got an idea in his head it would take a derrick to get it out.

It was he who had made the discovery that the knife found in Mulligan's cabin—which had evidently slipped from the belt of the marauder, without his knowledge, while he had been engaged in searching the bunk for concealed valuables—was like the one carried by Cool Colorado, and so he had immediately jumped to the conclusion that the half-breed was the robber.

He had not hesitated either to make public his conviction and had, by virtue of the declaration, assumed the leadership of the party which had been speedily formed to pursue the robber.

And now that it was apparent that the knife was not the one belonging to Cool Colorado—unless indeed the half-breed possessed two exactly alike—he was staggered but not satisfied.

Dull as his mind was he had hit upon the idea that Colorado—as he was familiarly termed—might have two knives, and so, after weighing the matter over in his mind for a few moments, he said:

"Wa-al, that is a pretty good explanation of yours, Colorado, but then, if you are the chap who did the mischief you would be apt to be ready to fool any galoots w'ot got arter you in some sich way, so I hope you won't take it hard if I say that a judge and jury ought for to look inter this matter. If you are an innocent man, then, in course, you ain't got anything to fear."

"Oh, I hav'n't the least objection to stand trial," the half-breed replied, immediately.

"There isn't the slightest doubt that I can easily prove I hadn't anything to do with the matter, but unless instant pursuit is given the odds are big that the scoundrel who did the deed will get away."

"I will see to that," Big-nosed Smith exclaimed, in the most confident manner possible.

"Cording to what you say the galoot was heading for Alpine and we kin git right on his track."

In obedience to Smith's suggestion Cool Colorado gave up his arms and was conducted by Big-nosed Smith and a couple of the miners to Bitteropolis while the rest took the trail for Alpine, the only eastern outlet from the valley in which the mining-camp was situated.

True there was a southern trail which led down into Gunnison but it was a long, round-about way.

CHAPTER V. THE TRIAL.

As the prisoner went with his captors without the slightest reluctance—and none of them had any fear of his attempting to escape—it was not deemed necessary to take any extra precautions in regard to him.

The party proceeded to the hotel at Bitteropolis—it was after midnight when they arrived there—and as the place had closed for the night, the landlord had to be roused from his slumber. Great was the astonishment of Perkins when he learned the particulars of the affair.

He scouted the idea, though, that Cool Colorado had any hand in the outrage.

"Why, boys, it was 'bout ten o'clock when he left here, and, cording to your yarn, Mulligan's cabin was robbed jest about that time, and I reckon it is a clear impossibility for a critter to be in two places at the same time, particularly when they are five miles apart."

"Now I tell you, Smith, it takes a mighty good walker to cover that distance much inside of an hour."

None of the miners who had figured in the arrest of Cool Colorado were noted for keenness of wit, and not one of the party had ever taken the trouble to figure out whether it was possible for the half-breed to commit the crimes, accepting as true his statement that he had not left Bitteropolis until a late hour.

The landlord, though, was a man who dealt in figures and, Yankee-like, was quick at calculating, and so the moment that Big-nosed Smith made the announcement that Barney Mulligan's cabin had been robbed about half-past ten o'clock and then the robber had killed Alex Williams, who lived a quarter of a mile down trail, and they had arrested Cool Colorado on the suspicion that he was the man who did the deed, the landlord of the Millionaire's Home knew immediately that, to use the old saying, the miners were "barking up the wrong tree."

Perkins did not hesitate to express his sentiment, too, in the plainest way.

In fact, he told the miners that, in his opinion, they were acting like a pack of jackasses, and while they were fooling away time with Cool Colorado, the real culprit was afforded a chance to escape.

Here again Big-nosed Smith's bullheadedness came in.

"It was all right!" he declared. A gang had set out in chase of the horseman whom the half-breed had described, and he "reckoned" that notwithstanding Cool Colorado's statement seemed to be pretty "sugar," a judge and jury ought to have the chance of looking into it.

The miners too were rather inclined to side with their leader, particularly as the half-breed said it didn't make any difference to him as he had not the least fear of standing trial.

"All right! go your own gait!" Perkins exclaimed. "But I tell you, once for all, you are

just wasting time which might be used to better advantage."

Big-nosed Smith was determined though to "run" matters according to his ideas, and so Perkins provided a large room for the accommodation of the prisoner and his guards.

Bitteropolis had not yet arrived at the dignity of possessing a jail, or any place of detention, where a prisoner could be safely confined.

In the morning the news of the tragedy on Pine Creek and the arrest of Cool Colorado on suspicion of being concerned in the matter spread with wonderful rapidity and, as a natural result, by seven o'clock in the morning almost all the inhabitants of the camp and its vicinity were gathered in and around the Millionaire's Home.

The sentiment of the crowd was that Big-nosed Smith and his fellows had made a mistake in arresting the half-breed, yet there were a few who held with the captors that, under the circumstances, a judge and jury should have a chance to pass upon the case.

Just about seven o'clock the miners who had been dispatched to trail the strange horseman returned and reported that they had not been able to get on his track.

In fact, they stated that they had not found a single person on the road, which the horseman had taken, according to Cool Colorado's statement, who had seen any such horse and rider.

They had gone as far as the toll-house—the road to Alpine was controlled by one of these modern robbers, commonly called toll-gatherers—and the man in charge of the toll-house, who, of course, was accustomed to noting all who passed, said, decidedly, that, although three horsemen had passed his station that night between nine o'clock and twelve, yet no "dark chestnut horse with three white stockings and a bright blaze in the forehead," had gone along.

"There were one white boss, a sorrel, and a bay, but nary che-tnut."

So it was plain that the stranger had quitted the Alpine trail before coming to the toll-house.

When this report was made public, there were a few suspicious souls who shook their heads and quietly insinuated to their cronies that it was "mighty queer" if the half-breed had met any such horse and rider as he described, no one else happened to see them.

It did not take long to select a judge and jury.

Tom McGregor, a middle-aged, tawny-bearded Scotchman, with all the thrift and hard "hoss-sense" of his race, was unanimously elected to preside over the trial.

Twelve good men were chosen for jurors, and the trial at once commenced.

As the camp lacked a "temple of justice," and there wasn't an apartment in the town anywhere big enough to accommodate all the people who wished to witness the proceedings, the judge decided that the affair should take place in the open air—beneath "the broad canopy of Heaven," as one of miners, poetically inclined, remarked.

In fact, so small were the buildings—which had been run up in a hurry, for the camp was a mushroom city which, after the fashion of Aladdin's palace, had sprung up almost in a single night—that there wasn't a room in the town big enough to accommodate the judge, jury, prisoner and witnesses, to say nothing of the citizens, who would have been furious if they had not been allowed to witness the proceedings.

The old saying regarding the "law's delays" does not apply to Judge Lynch's court, as this truly American institution is run in the far Western land.

A box with a chair on it was provided for the judge, the jurors squatted upon a couple of shoe-boxes, a barrel standing upright, the good head upward, was provided for the prisoner's accommodation, and upon this he sat.

Tom McGregor proceeded immediately to business.

"Say, Colorado, this is a bad business—what do you know about it?"

Thus questioned, the half-breed told his plain, straightforward tale, to which all listened with the deepest attention; and although the bystanders were amazed at the murder, they were still more astonished when Cool Colorado revealed how great was the amount of gold which he and his partner had taken from the Pine Creek Claim.

And there were a great many of the listeners who were inclined to believe that the half-breed had either made some mistake about the matter or was wantonly exaggerating the value of the secret hoard.

If he had spoken the truth, the Pine Creek Claim was worth any ten "strikes" in the neigh-

borhood, a fact which not a soul in the camp had suspected, for it was well-known that the discoverer of the "lead" did not make a fortune out of it, and when he succeeded in selling it to Alexander Williams at a good price, went around town and boasted in regard to how he had "stuck the tenderfoot."

"Well, man, your story is all straight enough on the face," the Scotchman observed, "and now, Smith, we want to hear from you."

"Why did you arrest Colorado, and what reason have you to suppose he had any hand in the murder of Alex Williams?"

As will be seen, the miner judge did not proceed in accordance with the time-honored rules of law courts; but, as a bystander significantly observed, "he's gittin' thar, all the same!"

Thus summoned, Big-nosed Smith related the particulars of the robbery of Barney Mulligan's cabin, and the finding of the knife which they saw was exactly like the one carried by Cool Colorado.

This led to his being suspected, and so the party went at once to his cabin for the purpose of interviewing him in regard to the matter and so discovered that Alexander Williams had been murdered.

Then the speaker described how they had found the half-breed examining the money-belt of the dead man, and seeing the blood upon his hands, at once jumped to the conclusion that he was the murderer.

"Did Colorado offer any explanation?"

Big-nosed Smith said he did, and related what the prisoner had said.

"Tain't improbable," the judge commented. "But how about the knife? Was it his'n?"

The miner was obliged to admit that Cool Colorado had denied the ownership of the knife, and had produced his weapon to show he spoke the truth.

"Any man in the crowd ever see Colorado have two knives exactly alike?" the Scotchman asked.

The miners looked in each other's faces in an inquiring way, but no one in the assemblage was able to come forward and testify that they had ever seen the half-breed in the possession of two knives.

"Well, that p'int don't go for much, then," the Scotchman observed.

"If it can't be proved that the prisoner had two weapons, the finding of a knife, which the robber dropped, exactly like the one Colorado carries, ain't any proof ag'in' him."

"Where are the knives?"

The pair were handed to him.

McGregor examined them with a critical eye.

"They are as alike as two peas, but I reckon there's plenty more like them in the camp. 'Pears to me that I have got one in my belt now."

And as he spoke the judge drew forth his own knife from its sheath.

It was the truth.

The keenest eyes could not have detected that there was any difference in the weapons.

"Well, that p'int is settled, and now let us see if we can get at the time when these two crimes were committed."

This was easily done, and according to the testimony the robbery of Mulligan took place about half-past ten and the murder of Williams thirty minutes or so afterward.

CHAPTER VI. THE VERDICT.

"Now, then, Colorado, 'bout what time did you leave the Millionaire's Home last night?" the judge queried.

"A few minutes past ten."

"As I understand the matter, your defense is that you couldn't possibly have got from the camp to Pine Creek in time to commit these crimes?"

"Yes, sir; I think I can prove the cleverest kind of an alibi."

"Well, it kinder seems that way to me, too," the judge admitted, frankly. "But we are going to get right down to the roots of the thing."

"Anybody here who can tell anything about the time that Colorado left the Millionaire's Home last night?"

Perkins, the landlord of the Millionaire's Home immediately stepped forward in the promptest manner.

"I calculate, judge, I kin tell you something 'bout that," he said.

"Spit it out!"

"It was jest about five minutes arter ten when he started fer to go. I remember the time distinctly, judge, fer I axed him what he war in sich

a hurry fer, seeing it was early, and it wouldn't take him but a leetle over an hour to get home."

"I see; and if he left your place at ten, he couldn't possibly have got to Mulligan's cabin by half-past ten if he walked," the Scotchman remarked.

"But if he had a hoss and rode hard he could have made the raffle!" Big-nosed Smith exclaimed; being a narrow-minded, bull-headed man, he was reluctant to admit that he had made a "bad break," and showed himself to be a stupid blunderer when he accused Cool Colorado of being the man who had robbed Mulligan and murdered Williams.

"Yes, if he had had a hoss he might have covered the distance in the time," the judge remarked.

"And, by the way, did you discover any evidence to lead you to suppose that the man who put up these jobs had a hoss?"

Big-nosed Smith was reluctantly obliged to admit that he hadn't discovered anything of the kind.

"Any evidence to show that Colorado had a hoss, or had had one?"

Again the miner was compelled to answer in the negative.

"I haven't been on the back of a horse since I have been in the camp!" the half-breed exclaimed.

"In fact I reckon there isn't many hosses 'round these diggings," the judge observed.

And this was the truth, for the miners had no use for horses.

"Now, Colorado, the case seems to be pretty clear to me," the Scotchman continued, "but before I give it to the jury I will try to make it still clearer, so I want to put a few questions to you."

"All right, judge, go ahead!" Cool Colorado replied. "I don't fear the strictest kind of a cross-examination."

"About what time did you get home last night?"

"Well, I don't exactly know," the half-breed replied "for when I discovered the awful tragedy which had happened in my absence, I was so overcome by it that I never thought of noticing what time it was, but I should judge it was a little after half-past eleven."

"How's that? How long does it usually take you to go home—an hour and twenty minutes?"

"Oh, no; I generally cover the distance in an hour," the half-breed immediately answered.

"Pretty quick time for five miles."

"But it isn't five miles, judge, although it is usually called so; it is really under four, and it seldom takes me more than an hour to cover it."

"Hold on! there's a leetle discrepancy here," the judge remarked.

"Last night it took you considerably over an hour to get home. But we will get at that in a moment."

"How long was it after you arrived at your cabin before Smith and his party came in?"

"Ten or fifteen minutes, I should judge—not over fifteen at the outside. In fact, although I didn't take any particular notice of how the time went, I feel pretty certain that it was nearer ten minutes than fifteen."

"Lemme see! you got home about half-past eleven, ten minutes more would make it about a quarter to twelve," observed the canny Scotchman, counting the time on his fingers.

"How does that agree with your ideas, Smith?" he asked, turning to the miner.

"That is about right, I reckon," that worthy replied.

"Right to a minute, judge!" exclaimed one of the men who had helped Smith arrest Cool Colorado.

"I looked at my watch jest as we halted outside of the cabin and it was eleven forty-five exactly!"

And the man lugged out his ancient silver time-piece, as if the production of the watch would prove the truth of his statement.

"Well, that point is settled. Now, Colorado, will you explain why you were so long on the road?"

"Now, judge, that isn't really necessary, is it?" asked the half-breed, "not that there is any particular reason why I shouldn't explain the matter, only that it is my own private business, and really of no concern to the public at large."

"It would be better for you to explain," the Scotchman urged.

Then a female form advanced through the throng.

It was Bad Man Jackson's daughter, the blooming beauty "Polly," and never had the young girl seemed more pretty than at this moment, as she pushed her way through the crowd, blushing like a red, red rose.

"Judge, I have some testimony to offer," she said in a clear tone, so that her words were distinctly heard by all, although her voice trembled slightly.

Cool Colorado smiled, the judge looked a little puzzled, like the majority of the bystanders, some few in the crowd "snickered," and old man Jackson glared in rage at his daughter, his face as black as a thunder-cloud.

"Certainly, Miss Jackson, we shall be glad to hear what you have to say."

"It was exactly half-past ten last night when this gentleman left the camp," she said, blushing to her temples, but otherwise showing no signs of confusion.

"I happened to step to the door of my house just as he came up the road from the center and I stopped him to ask if he had seen anything of my father, because he said he would be home early, and as he hadn't come, I didn't know but what something had happened to him."

"Yes, yes, I see, quite natural," observed the judge, gravely nodding his head, but in his mind the thought came that if Cool Colorado had not been a deucedly good-looking young fellow the girl would not have been apt to trouble him with any questions about her father.

"It was just ten minutes past ten when Mr. Colorado came along, and we got into conversation, so that it was exactly half-past ten when he bid me good-night and went on his way."

Quite a number in the throng exchanged knowing glances with each other.

In their minds there wasn't the least doubt that the belle of the camp had taken a fancy to the dashing young miner.

Jackson, the father, was furious.

Although at the close of his contest with the young man, he had expressed himself as being satisfied, and expressly said that he did not bear any malice, it was not the truth.

There was no such generous trait in his nature.

He had been fairly conquered in a fair fight, but instead of accepting his defeat in the right spirit, his heart was filled with rage and he had sworn that at the first possible chance he would be revenged upon his victorious antagonist.

And now to discover that his daughter was on friendly terms with the young man, was as gall and wormwood to him.

"I am certain about the time, for I looked at the clock on both occasions," the girl said in conclusion.

"I am very much obliged to you indeed," Cool Colorado hastened to observe, with a low bow to the lady.

"I didn't think I was really called upon to mention your name in the matter, for ladies are generally rather 'backward in coming forward' in all such cases as this one, and I wouldn't take the liberty of dragging you into the matter without taking occasion to ask your permission."

"Well, I am not anxious to appear in public, but when a fellow-creature's liberty or life is threatened, I think it is my duty to do all I can to aid the accused."

"Miss Jackson, you have acted perfectly right!" the judge exclaimed, "and deserve great credit for the spirit you have displayed."

This caused the girl to blush more furiously still, but she managed to retain her composure, and after thanking the judge for his compliment withdrew to her former position.

"Well, gentlemen of the jury, I reckon we have got hold of all the evidence we kin scare up about this case," the Scotchman remarked. "And as the matter seems pretty clear to my mind, I don't doubt it is to yours, so I won't trouble you with any chin-music. Go it, ye cripplies!"

It did not take the jurors long to make up their minds, and their verdict was quickly rendered:

"Not guilty!"

And as this was the opinion of nearly every one in the crowd the verdict was received with a yell of approval.

"Well, gentlemen, I think you hit the nail right on the head that time," the judge observed, "for in my opinion there isn't the least doubt that Colorado didn't have any hand in the matter."

"Of course I don't blame our friend Smith here for his action in the case, as it was only natural, under the circumstances, that he should suspect Colorado had something to do with the matter."

"And now, gentlemen, seeing as how we have the machine in running order, I s'pose we ought to go out to the Pine Creek Mine, examine the body and come to an opinion in regard to Williams's death."

This idea met with the approval of the miners and it was decided to go at once.

First though the judge went through the form of discharging the prisoner, and the moment this was done Cool Colorado was surrounded by his friends and acquaintances, eager to shake his hand and extend their congratulations.

About all the male inhabitants of the camp accompanied the judge and jury to the scene of the tragedy.

The investigation was as complete as possible under the circumstances, but nothing in addition to what was already known was developed.

Therefore there wasn't anything for the jury to do but to render a verdict that the unfortunate Alexander Williams had met his death at the hands of "parties unknown."

And then the remains of the murdered man were decently buried in a grassy spot on the hillside, a short distance from his cabin and a rudely constructed cross erected to mark the grave.

After the funeral services the crowd dispersed, taking their way back to the town, leaving Cool Colorado in possession of the cabin.

CHAPTER VII.

THREE PARDS.

BAD Man Jackson had been decidedly offended when the half-breed informed him that he had succeeded, just by accident, in making his daughter's acquaintance, and this, more even than the banter of the hotel-keeper, induced him to force Cool Colorado into a fight.

But when his daughter stepped forward before all the crowd and admitted that she had held a second conversation with the young man, and the two, although strangers to each other, had found enough to talk about to fill up the space of twenty minutes, then his rage was intense.

He hated the half-breed anyway, although after the success of the other in the wrestling bout, he had said he was satisfied and willing to admit that the other was the best man, yet this was because his defeat had for the moment cowed him, and he had not pluck enough to pursue the quarrel further at the time.

But when he came to reflect upon the matter he was angry with himself for allowing the other to obtain so easy a victory.

Fifty times at least he had muttered to himself:

"If I hadn't tried for to clinch with the feller, so as to gi'n him a b'ar-hug, but had jest gone in and smashed him with my fists, I would have knocked daylight outen him!"

And Jackson had repeated this so often over to himself, that at last he felt perfectly sure that there wasn't the least doubt about it.

During the trial he had stood on the outskirts of the crowd.

A savage exultation had taken possession of him when he heard that his half-breed conqueror was accused of murder, and if it had been within his power, he would have done much to put the rope around the neck of the man he hated.

The appearance of his daughter as a witness to prove the innocence of Cool Colorado, made him so hot with anger that he could hardly refrain from giving open vent to his displeasure, but he had sense enough to understand that if he did, it would most certainly bring upon him the jeers of the miners, for the average man would be apt to regard the matter as a deuced good joke, so he fumed and chafed in silence.

As the judge and jury, the prisoner and the witnesses were the center of interest to which all eyes were turned, the angry father had no idea that any one was paying any attention to him.

But just a little in his rear, and about a yard distant, were three townsmen who were keeping the closest kind of a watch upon him.

Three as well-known men, too, were these fellows as the camp of Bitteropolis could boast.

They were three pards, and did not bear the best of reputations.

The care which the three bestowed upon their personal appearance, in direct contradiction to the usual careless habits of the miners, plainly revealed to the experienced eye that they belonged to the great army of sports, who, like the vultures and the wolves that follow an army marching to battle, keep in close contact with the great march of civilization as it advances into the wilderness.

One of the sports was a man of forty or thereabouts, a tall, rather thin fellow, with a hatchet-like face.

He did not appear to be as tall as he really was on account of a peculiar stoop which he had.

Being one of the leading gamblers of the State he was as well known as any man in Colorado.

Crooked Pat O'Neal he was called, and report said that he had passed through as many desperate affrays as any man who had ever "run a game" in the State.

The second was a burly, middle-aged man, with a fat face, ornamented with a short, bushy red beard and straggling locks of the same hue.

Few men from the looks of his countenance would have been apt to have taken him for a sport, as he looked more like a jolly cattleman, a farmer, or something of that sort, rather than a man who lived by his wits, as the saying is.

He was called John Maxwell, but, after the fashion of the frontier, was better known by a nickname than by his own, and that was Missouri Johnny.

The third man was the typical gambler.

Young, not over thirty, dressed with extreme care, slight in stature, with finely-cut, expressive features, a brunette with jet-black hair, eyes and mustache, his face pale, while his long, slender hands were as white and delicate as the hands of a woman.

From his appearance one would have taken him to be the son of a tropical clime.

His name was Bud Poindexter and he claimed to be a Creole from New Orleans.

He too had a nick-name, and few of the men who knew the spot ever called him anything but Slender Bud.

These three ran the principal gambling-place in Bitteropolis, know as the Silver Moon Saloon; where the seeker after a short-cut to wealth could be accommodated with almost any game that he desired to play.

Of course such men as these went around with their lives in their hands, for it was a common occurrence for some desperate soul, after losing all his wealth to the sports, to endeavor to get some of it back by a resort to the strong arm of force.

But all three men were quick on the trigger, handy with their bowie-knives, and it was an extremely difficult matter to get the drop on any one of them.

We have been particular to give a complete description of the three sports as they will have an important part to play in our tale, as the reader will see anon.

The sports had been paying particular attention to the trial, and when the disclosure was made in regard to the value of the Pine Creek Mine they held a whispered consultation, and, being apart from the rest of the crowd they were able to do this without attracting attention.

After the consultation they again paid strict attention to the trial, and when Polly Jackson surprised everybody by coming forward as a witness, they happened to notice old Jackson, and readily detected the fact that he was in a terrible rage.

Then, an idea seeming to occur to Crooked Pat O'Neal, he confided it to his companions, and the three held another conference.

After the jury arrived at their verdict and the start was made for Pine Creek the three pards brought up the rear of the procession.

After arriving at Pine Creek, they were attentive listeners to the proceedings, but kept a little back from the throng gathered around the cabin.

Bad Man Jackson, being in a surly mood, did not mix with the rest but held aloof like the three sports.

And the pards, in the most careless manner possible, just as if it was by accident, selected a position where they could watch old Jackson without apparently paying any particular attention to him.

Now if any one of the long-headed miners—men who were accustomed to use their wits—had noticed the movement of the sports, the observer would have immediately jumped to the conclusion that the sporting gentlemen had some important object in view, for they were not men to do anything of this kind without a definite purpose.

When the body of the murdered man was committed to its last resting-place, and the miners set out on their homeward route, old man Jackson and the three pards brought up the rear, and soon after the homeward march commenced, Crooked Pat O'Neal took advantage of his proximity to old Jackson to accost him.

"Mighty mixed-up business, eh, Jackson?" the sport observed.

"Yes, I reckon it is," the old man replied, shortly, for he was not in the humor for conversation.

"You bet it is!" Missouri Johnny cried.

"There isn't the least doubt in my mind that it is one of the strangest affairs that I ever heard of in all my experience," Slender Bud remarked, in the peculiarly slow, languid way common to him.

"I reckon that if I had been on that ar' jury, I wouldn't have been so durned quick to bring in a verdict that Cool Colorado didn't have no hand in the killing of his pard!" Crooked Pat O'Neal observed, with an air of great deliberation.

"Them is my sentiments to a ha'r!" Missouri Johnny cried, with more vigor than correctness.

"Well, sir, you couldn't persuade me in a month of Sundays to believe that that half-breed galoot didn't have a hand in the affair!" Slender Bud declared.

These utterances exactly agreed with Bad Man Jackson's sentiments, and he hastened to say so.

"If I had been on the jury I would hev found that darned, copper-colored cuss guilty and hung him to the nearest tree!" the old man cried.

"Right you are, old man!" Crooked Pat O'Neal cried.

"Jackson, your head is level, and no mistake!" Missouri Johnny assented.

"Oh, the galoot killed the man, and he ought to swing for it, and the camp will find it out too some of these days!" was the Creole's opinion.

Jackson felt considerably comforted by these declarations, as welcome as they were unexpected, and his heart warmed toward the three pards.

"You're right 'bout it, boys, and, as Slender hyer says, the camp will find it out some day. I know that the mud-colored cuss is no good and I hain't had no opinion of him ever since I knowed him!"

"Is that so?" exclaimed the chief of the three pards with an air of astonishment, as though he was surprised at the statement.

As it had happened, neither one of the three sports had chanced to be in the Millionaire's Home Saloon at the time when the half-breed had made Bad Man Jackson cry enough, but the report of such an affair travels fast in a mining-camp, and such stories never lose anything in the telling, so the sports were as well-posted in regard to Cool Colorado's victory as though they had witnessed his triumph, but Jackson did not stop to think about this, and as the three had not witnessed his defeat, he believed they were not aware of the reason he had for hating the half-breed.

"You are right!" Crooked Pat O'Neal declared with an air of conviction, "the fellow is no good, and—although it is no business of mine—if I were you I wouldn't have no such fellow making up to my gal!"

"Nary time!" cried Missouri Johnny.

"Not much!" exclaimed Slender Bud in the most emphatic manner.

"And if I were you, Jackson, I would go back and tell him so, right now, and if he gave me any back talk I would warn him so that he wouldn't want to look at another woman for a year!"

"That's the talk!" chimed in the chief of the three. "And we will go with you and take a hand in the fun!"

CHAPTER VIII.

JACKSON TRIES IT ON AGAIN.

HERE was "backing" with a vengeance!

When it came to the question of a personal difficulty, three better men than the allied sports to espouse a quarrel could not be found in a square hundred miles around Bitteropolis.

The proposal was a tempting one, and Bad Man Jackson lost no time in deliberating over the matter.

Here was a chance to get "square" with the man he hated, and, eagerly, he grasped the opportunity.

"Boys, I reckon you are right 'bout this hyer thing, an' it 'pears to me that it is 'bout time this durned mud-colored galoot is made to understand that he had better quit foolin' around a decent white gal."

The three sports were quick to assure the father that he expressed their opinion exactly.

"Yes, sir-ee!" and old man Jackson came to a halt, "you are right, gen'lmen, for a thousand ducats!"

"It is time this foolin' is stopped, an' I will jest go back an' talk to this galoot like a Dutch uncle!"

"Yes, and we will go along with you, and see that you have a fair show for your money!" Crooked Pat O'Neal declared.

"Thar ain't much danger 'bout sich a man as

Jackson hyer gitting a fair show with such a cuss as this galoot of a half-breed!" cried Missouri Johnny, in a tone which plainly showed how supreme was the contempt which he had for Cool Colorado.

"You mustn't kill him outright, you know, old man," suggested the Creole.

"All you want is to smash him so that he will not feel like doing much for a week or two. Just lay him out so he will have time to reflect and see what a fool he made of himself in trying to run after the daughter of such a man as you are!"

Jackson was so enraged at the half-breed that it did not require much urging to induce him to go back and have it out with him, and so, with the declaration that he would make Cool Colorado keep away from his "darter, Polly," or know the reason why, the old man, accompanied by the three sports, started for Pine Creek.

It was the calculation of the pards, when they planned this little surprise for Cool Colorado, that they would be able to catch the half-breed alone, but in this they were disappointed, for when they came into the little valley in which the mine was situated, they found half a dozen of the settlers, who had their cabins further up the stream, talking with the man they sought.

This was Big-nosed Smith's party—the one which had arrested the half-breed.

After the funeral they had started for their homes, but had hardly got out of the sight of the half-breed's cabin when a discussion arose in regard to whether it wouldn't be the "square thing" for them to go back and express to Cool Colorado how glad they were he had got out of the ugly scrape, and ask him not to bear malice because they had been led away by suspicious circumstances.

Big-nosed Smith, with his usual obstinacy, was the only man who "reckoned there wasn't no call" to take any action in the matter, but, finding the rest were so strongly against him, he gave in, and so it happened that instead of finding Cool Colorado alone he was surrounded by friends.

"Thar's a gang with him," Crooked Pat O'Neal observed.

"Yes, quite a crowd," Missouri Johnny remarked.

"It don't make a bit of difference!" Slender Bud exclaimed. "For if the cuss gives you any back talk, Jackson—and he will be mighty apt to do it now that he has some friends around—and you go in to smash him, it will be just as well to have somebody besides our own party to witness the fight, for if you should happen to kill the fellow it will be handy to have men to prove that it was all fair and above-board."

The rest assented to this reasoning, and by this time Jackson had worked himself up to such a pitch of excitement that, bulldog-like, he was anxious to get at his foe.

The group of miners, who surrounded Cool Colorado, noticed old man Jackson and the three sports the moment they made their appearance, and their suspicions were immediately excited.

"By gol, Colorado! this hyer looks as if old man Jackson was comin' back with the idee of havin' a leetle go at you!" Big-nosed Smith exclaimed, ever suspicious.

"Yes, yes!" observed the others.

"Mebbe it's lucky that we came back," suggested one of the men.

"Yes, if we hadn't, we would not hev' been able to see the circus—for I reckon there is going to be one," Big-nosed Smith remarked.

"Well, I don't know," Cool Colorado remarked in his quiet way.

"It seems to me that after the taste of my quality that Jackson had in the Millionaire's Home that he would not be apt to hanker after another trial of my skill."

"Still, there are some men in this world who are hard to satisfy, and Jackson may be one of them. Of course, I don't know, for I am not well-acquainted with the gentleman."

"But if he is coming arter satisfaction I suppose you will do your level best to accommodate him?" Big-nosed Smith remarked with a grin.

"Oh, yes, I always try to be obliging."

"Those sports are the pards who run the Silver Moon Ranch," one of the miners remarked.

"Yes, three as good men for a war-party as there is in the camp!" Big-nosed Smith exclaimed. "And I don't r'ally understand how they came to be mixed up with Jackson, for I never knew the old man to travel with them."

"But it is all right if they were six times as good as they are, for we have a gang hyer who

are able to hold their own, I reckon, with any crowd who kin be scared up in this section!"

Big-nosed Smith was right about this, for though the up-creek men were all honest, industrious miners, without a gambler or a black sheep of any kind among them, yet they were all brave and hardy fellows, men who would not stand any nonsense from anybody.

Conversation was suspended as Jackson and the three sports approached, and all eyes were fixed upon the new-comers in curious speculation.

Old man Jackson came on until he got within a couple of yards of the half-breed and then he halted.

"See hyer, Mister Cool Colorado, I've got a few words to say to you!" he exclaimed in a loud and arrogant tone, his manner full of offense.

"Well, I am always ready to listen to anything that any one is anxious to say to me," the half-breed rejoined. "But allow me to say to you, right in the beginning, that there is not the slightest necessity for you to shout in that way. I am not in the least troubled with hardness of hearing, and I am quite sure I will understand every word you say if you speak in an ordinary tone, so, will you have the kindness to oblige, yours truly, in that respect?"

Jackson stared at the speaker for a moment as if he didn't exactly know what to make of him, while the three pards exchanged glances.

It was the half-breed's peculiar calmness and this odd way of speaking which had fastened upon him the appellation of Cool Colorado.

"I reckon I will talk as I durned please!" exclaimed old Jackson angrily.

"Oh, certainly, of course, go ahead, just as you like," replied the other.

"You are not obliged to do as I want you to, you know; it is only a polite request, addressed from one gentleman to another gentleman, and if you don't choose to heed it, there's no law to compel you to do so."

"Oh, blazes! you talk too much with your mouth!" cried old man Jackson, who was not so dull as not to understand that at this sort of thing he was no match for the other.

"I can't spit out the big words so darned easy as you kin; but, I reckon, I kin talk plain enuff so you kin understand wot I am a-driving at!"

"And if I don't you will explain, of course; I feel sure I can rely upon you to do that," Cool Colorado replied immediately.

Some of the miners could not help snickering at this rejoinder, which served to enrage Jackson the more.

"Oh, darn yer cursed foolishness!" he cried. "I come hyer for business, I did, an' not to fool, an' I want you to understand that I mean business, every time!"

"Certainly, of course, who said you didn't?"

"I want you to understand that I don't 'low any galoots to come sneakin' arter my gal, Polly, an' I jest take this opportunity for to tell you that if I catch you hangin' round my cabin thar will be a heap of trouble."

"Hold on! let us understand this matter!" said the young man.

"Didn't you say in the Millionaire's Home, when I first met you, that no man should come after your girl until he had shown that he was a better man than you was?"

"Right you 'ar! I did say it," responded Jackson, too dull-witted to guess what the question led to.

"And didn't I prove to you that I was a better man than any fellow that ever stood in your shoes, so what is the matter with my talking to your daughter, provided that it is agreeable to her, and I'm betting a stack of chips that it is?"

"Darn yer impudence!" howled the old man in a rage. "You ain't no better man than I am!"

"The deuce I ain't? Didn't I down you in a fair fight, and didn't you own up that you had got all you wanted, and wasn't anxious for more?"

"You did it by a blamed trick!" yelled Jackson, in a terrible state of rage. "And I had been drinking, too—I had been h'istin' enuff benzine to float a ship."

"But now I am all right, an' I'm able to pound you within an inch of yer life!"

"Oho! that is what you are after, is it?"

"You bet!"

"You want a fight?"

"I'm jest hungry to chaw you up!"

"When you try it on, I reckon you will find I am the toughest bit of meat you ever attempted to chew!"

"That is all blow!" exclaimed Jackson, flourishing his long arms, windmill fashion.

"You come some sort of a durned trick on me

the other night, but you can't do it ag'in. I'm yer mutton, an' if I don't hammer you until yer best friend won't know yer, then I don't want a cent!"

"You are hungering after a fair fist fight, eh?"

"Now you 'call' me!"

"Without weapons?"

"I don't need any weapon to mash you all to pieces!" cried Jackson, in the most ferocious manner.

"I'm too much of a gentleman to tell you that you are a gas-bag, but that is about the size of it, as you will discover before this picnic is over."

"Are you ready for me?" howled Jackson.

"You bet! Let her go, Gallagher!"

CHAPTER IX.

AN ASTONISHED MAN.

OLD man Jackson's plan of operations was simple enough.

Taught by sad experience that as a wrestler he stood no chance at all with his more experienced foe, he had made up his mind not to close in with him, but, with a bull-like rush, to batter him with his big fists.

Not that Jackson possessed any boxing skill, for a man more ignorant of the so-called "noble art of self-defense" it would have been hard to find.

His only idea of boxing was to rush at his opponent and strike at him as quickly and as viciously as possible.

Cool Colorado in his pilgrimage through the world had acquired considerable knowledge of the pugilistic art, and although he was not as big a man as his antagonist, yet he was fully as powerful, and in all that goes to the making of a successful boxer was far more highly favored by nature.

The moment that Cool Colorado's defiance fell upon Jackson's ears he made a desperate rush at the half-breed, intending to smash him with a couple of sledge-hammer like blows.

The young man did not yield an inch of ground, but as the old fellow rushed upon him his powerful right arm shot out, the fist landing plump between the eyes of his antagonist, bringing him up all a-standing, as a sailor would say, and old man Jackson was surprised by the appearance of more stars than he had ever witnessed before.

And then, quick to improve his advantage, the half-breed "measured" his opponent, to use the boxing term, and sent out his powerful "left;" the mighty stroke landed full on the chest of Bad Man Jackson, compelling that astonished individual to tumble over backward in an extremely awkward manner.

And he came down too with a concussion which shook him up internally, in a particularly disagreeable way.

An exclamation of delight arose from the throats of the miners as they beheld the sight, while the three pards had all they could do to conceal their disappointment at beholding their champion thus early disposed of, a conclusion which was a complete surprise to them.

"Oh, this is no go!" Crooked Pat O'Neal whispered hurriedly in the ear of the Creole.

"This fellow will never be able to do anything with such a man."

"So I am afraid," replied Slender Bud in the same rapid and mysterious manner.

"We will have to try either hot lead or cold steel on him."

Then they sprung to the assistance of Jackson and helped him to his feet.

"Take it easy, old man," said Crooked Pat O'Neal in his ear, "and be careful how you expose yourself to this fellow's blows. He is considerable of a boxer, evidently, and you must try to do a leetle in that live."

"Yes, don't rush in, but hammer him at long range," the Creole counseled.

"It was all an accident, you see," Missouri Johnny explained.

"The cuss couldn't hit you that way again and I'm betting dollars to cents on it too!"

And if he had added the slang expression "in my mind," it would have been nearer the truth.

The miners were delighted with the "show," as Big-nosed Smith termed it, when he expressed his opinion that to be permitted to see such a sight was worth "fifty cents of any man's money, reserved seats extra!"

That, despite his apparent advantage in size, the old man was fearfully overmatched was the opinion of the spectators, shrewd, practical men of the world.

"He's in for the worst kind of a licking," one of bystanders remarked.

"He don't stand no more show with Colorado than a turkey-buzzard does alongside of an eagle, and the longer he keeps at it the worse it will be for him," Big-nosed Smith observed.

"If he's wise he will quit now," the first speaker declared.

But the old man had more pluck than they gave him credit for, and then, never having encountered such a foe as the half-breed before, or having witnessed any display of boxing skill, he could not bring himself to believe that the two terrible strokes which he had received were not accidental.

So he was ready to renew the contest when he gained his feet.

But he had learned that it would not do to attempt to "rush" his antagonist.

No, he would try the game of his opponent, and bring a little science to his aid.

So, acting on this idea, he sparred clumsily at the half-breed.

The bystanders watched the scene with delighted eyes; it was not often that they had the chance to enjoy such a treat.

For a few moments the antagonists sparred, and then old man Jackson, thinking he saw an opportunity to get at his opponent, proceeded to improve it, and this time Cool Colorado retreated slowly, parrying the blows of his opponent, though with very little trouble.

Jackson was not skillful boxer enough to hit out straight from the shoulder, but gave "round arm" blows.

Encouraged by the thought that he was getting the best of the half-breed, for the giving way of the other seemed to him to indicate victory, he redoubled his efforts, advancing in the fiercest manner, showering blow after blow, which, despite all his efforts, landed upon the empty air, instead of upon the person of his antagonist.

Now, there isn't anything which will tire a man out much quicker than to strike heavy blows at intangible space, and after a minute or so of this fatiguing work, Jackson was compelled to pause from sheer weariness.

"Bellows to mend!" was the cry with him, for old man Jackson was burdened with a great deal of superfluous flesh, and in a contest of this kind every extra pound of fat that a man carries is a serious disadvantage to him.

From sheer want of breath Jackson was compelled to pause, and it was as much as he could do to keep his hands up, for each one of his fists seemed to him now as if it weighed a ton.

This was the opportunity which Cool Colorado sought—the "opening" for which he had planned.

The moment that Bad Man Jackson halted he assumed the offensive.

He made a "feint" with his left at the head of the other.

Jackson, in the most clumsy manner possible, threw up both hands to ward off the blow, thus leaving his chest unguarded, which was exactly what the half-breed supposed he would do, then out came Cool Colorado's dangerous "right," landing on Jackson's breast, just above his heart.

Over toppled the "Pride of Bitteropolis," going down all in a heap under the force of the tremendous stroke, which knocked about all the wind out of his body.

"Gen'lemen, it's a thousand ducats to a smack in the face that old Jackson won't come to time arter that lick!" Big-nosed Smith declared, with the air of a prophet.

His companions shook their heads in grave assent, for not one of them had the least doubt about the matter.

As for the three pards, although accustomed from the nature of their business to conceal their feelings, and meet either good or evil fortune with perfect unconcern, yet on this occasion, despite their great self-command, they were unable to prevent a look of disgust from appearing on their countenances when they saw their tool make so poor a show of himself.

"Nice kind of a galoot this is for to try to shine as a fighting-man," Crooked Pat O'Neal growled in the ear of Missouri Johnny.

"Yes, you bet," replied that worthy.

"Why, he don't stand no more chance with such a man as Cool Colorado than I would for to stand up ag'in' the champion in a ring fight."

"Oh, well, if our gun misses fire the first time, we must grin and bear it," Slender Bud remarked, overhearing the words with his remarkably acute ears.

"We must have another go. 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.'"

"That's the ticket!" Crooked Pat O'Neal assented.

Then, perceiving that old man Jackson was in need of assistance, the three hurried to his aid.

Jackson had been dazed by the terrible stroke, and it was a couple of minutes before he was able to understand what had happened.

Slowly he rose to his feet, all the fight evidently taken out of him by the rough handling he had received, but the anger still remained, and made ten times more by his overwhelming defeat.

"Time!" ejaculated Big-nosed Smith, in a professional sort of way, when old Jackson got on his "pins," as he would have expressed it.

Old man Jackson glared at the speaker in a manner which plainly indicated how unwelcome was his speech.

Big-nosed Smith only grinned though, just as if he considered that he had got off a good joke.

Cool Colorado had folded his arms across his breast while Jackson was recovering, but now that his opponent was on his feet, he threw himself in position again ready for an attack.

"Oh, you needn't git ready for to fight ag'in!" old Jackson cried, 'cos you ain't a-going to get a chance to try any more of your boxing tricks on me!"

"Ah, you have had enough then?"

"Too much, I reckon, from the look on him!" ejaculated the irrepressible Smith.

"Mebbe you would make a better show if you tried it on!" old Jackson exclaimed, eagerly.

"Wa-al, now, you kin bet a hoss to a hen that I wouldn't make any worse!" the miner replied.

"That p'int kin be decided better arter you git through!" Jackson retorted.

"I ain't a-going to try the raffle!" Smith exclaimed. "I've got too much sense for to stand up and git punished. When I go into a fight I pick out a man that I stand some show with. I don't want to fool with any cyclones."

"You are satisfied then?" Cool Colorado observed, addressing old man Jackson.

"No, I ain't!" snarled the other in reply, "and I want you to understand that this ain't the last of this hyer matter!"

"You had better settle it right now for good and all!" the half-breed suggested.

"Oh, no, I will wait until I get a good chance at you, and then I will squar' the account," old man Jackson replied in his ugliest way.

"And I want to give you a bit of a warning too! Don't you hang 'round my house, for if you do it won't be healthy for you!"

And then with his new-made friends, the three sports, the old man departed.

"He came for wool and got sheared!" was Big-nose Smith's comment.

CHAPTER X.

THE SPORT'S PLAN.

"I SAY, Jackson, it wasn't wise of you to give out your little game so free," Crooked Pat O'Neal remarked, after they were well out of hearing of the others.

"Why not? Curse the scoundrel! I will kill him before I get through with him."

"Of course, that is only natural under the circumstances. I don't blame you a bit!" the chief of the pards asserted, sympathetically.

"But if you calculate to do anything of the kind it ain't just the cheese, you know, to let your man onto your racket, so as to give him time to prepare and be all ready for you when you go to make the raffle."

"Yes, thar ain't any mistake about that. You made a bad break, old man, when you let on to Colorado that you was a-going for him one of these days," Missouri Johnny remarked.

"Yes, yes, thar isn't the least doubt about it," Slender Bud observed.

"The way to work a trick of this kind, on such a man as this cool and hardy sharp, is to take him unawares, then you will stand some chance for your money, but if you go to give him a fair shake for his white alley, the chances are big that he will be able to get away with you, and without half-trying, either."

"Yes, I suppose I acted like a fool in letting him know that I didn't consider the matter settled and was going for him ag'in," old man Jackson admitted, after thinking over the matter for a minute.

"But then, boys, you know a man don't alers do w'ot he ought to in this hyer life."

"You must consider the circumstances. I reckon if any one of you had got poured in the awful way I did it would be suthin' to make you feel savage, and when a man loses his temper he ain't apt to be keeful of w'ot he says!"

"Oh, yes, there ain't any doubt about that," Crooked Pat O'Neal observed, and the others assented.

"But you must keep your eyes peeled now,"

the Creole warned, true to the character he had of being "the brains" of the three pards.

"You have given Colorado fair notice that you don't consider this matter settled, and, of course, from this time out, whenever, or wherever, he meets you he will be on the lookout for trouble."

"Yes, yes!" cried the other two sports, and old man Jackson nodded his head as much as to say he agreed with the speaker.

"So, as I said, you must be careful how you handle yourself when Colorado is around," the Creole continued, "because any uncautious movement on your part will be apt to lead him to suspect you are going to pull a gun on him, and he will be mighty apt to pull his and let her rip at you without saying much."

"True as preaching!" added Crooked Pat O'Neal, impressively.

"You bet!" cried Missouri Johnny.

"Oh, I will be on the lookout!" Jackson exclaimed, evidently much impressed by the gravity of the situation.

"And when you pull on him, pull quick!" Slender Bud remarked, "for I have a kinder sort of an idea that the copper-colored cuss is just old lightning on the draw."

"Oh, no, I'm not going to try any game of that sort!" the old man declared, his anger by this time having considerably abated.

"I've tried the galoot on two holts now an' got a durned sight the worst on it in both heats, and I reckon I ain't anxious to give him another chance at me just yet. But if I caught him fooling 'round my cabin, you know, arter my gal, 'ticularly arter dark, I would be mighty apt to salivate him with a gun for keeps."

All three of the sports were loud in their approval of this idea; and Crooked Pat O'Neal took pains to assure Jackson that if he had any further trouble with the half-breed they would most certainly stick by him, and this circumstance encouraged the old man considerably, for the three sports were valuable friends.

When they arrived at the camp the party separated, old man Jackson going to his cabin and the pards to their saloon.

The Silver Moon Ranch was one of the largest in the camp; in the front was the gambling-room and bar, and in the rear a small apartment where the three kept bachelor's hall.

Like the majority of the saloons on the frontier, particularly those who depended more upon the gambling-tables than the bar, there wasn't much business ever done until the shades of night covered the earth, so the proprietors could safely trust the running of the place to their assistants.

In their private apartment the three seated themselves to hold a conference.

"Well, boys, we managed to slip up in a first-class manner in this first trial," Crooked Pat O'Neal observed.

"Oh, yes, you kin bet high on that!" Missouri Johnny cried.

"There is not the slightest doubt that we failed in the most complete and signal manner," Slender Bud remarked.

"Still, under these adverse circumstances, it is well to remember the old saying that one swallow does not make a summer, and, when you come to reflect upon the matter, wasn't we expecting a little too much when we reckoned that this old blow-hard would get away with such a man as Cool Colorado?"

"Pears to me we were a leetle off thar," Missouri Johnny admitted, after a slight pause.

"Yes, gents, but it wasn't my calculation when I suggested the thing that Jackson would be donkey enough to attempt to stand up against the sport in a fair fight," Crooked Pat O'Neal hastened to remark.

"That is true enough," Slender Bud exclaimed. "That was something that I didn't calculate upon, and I reckon I can see as far into a millstone as the next man. My idea, of course, was that old Jackson would go for the half-breed with a gun."

"But you didn't reckon that he would get the best of the fight, did you?" Missouri Johnny hastened to ask.

"Why, see hyer, Missouri, you ought to know better than to put that question!" Slender Bud exclaimed, with an air of disgust.

"Well, I didn't s'pose you did."

"No, sir-ee! If I had been putting up wealth on the fight, I would have been glad to back Colorado two to one, and I reckon I would have gone in so heavily that, if Colorado didn't succeed in pulling off the affair, I would have gone broke."

"My calculation was that the half-breed would lay the old man out, but then I was speculating on the chance that Colorado might get

a bullet; and then I reckoned, too, that some one of us could get an opportunity in the skirmish to put in a shot."

"Yes, yes, that was the little game I thought might be played," Crooked Pat O'Neal remarked.

"But as we didn't catch the galoot alone that leetle trick couldn't be worked," said Missouri Johnny with a mournful stroke of the head.

"No, the presence of the miners knocked that speculation into a cocked hat," the Creole observed.

"But, as I said before, boys, we can't afford to give our idea up for there is big money in it if we can only make the raffle."

"Not the least doubt about it!" Crooked Pat O'Neal declared.

"Why, gents, this Pine Creek strike is the biggest one that has ever been made anywhere in this section."

"If Colorado speaks the truth—and I don't think there is the least doubt that he does—he and his pard have taken out over ten thousand dollars' worth of stuff from the claims in the last two months besides their grub stakes."

"A mighty big showing!" observed Slender Bud with a wise nod.

"You kin bet it is!" Missouri Johnny exclaimed. "And I can tell you what it is, pards, it is more than the best ten—or mebbe, twenty claim in this district kin boast."

"Not the least doubt about it, and the chances are that if a good force was put on the mine, and the thing worked as it ought to be, that ten or twelve thousand dollars a month might be pulled out of it," Crooked Pat O'Neal declared.

"And to think that just one man stands between us and the biggest bonanza which has been struck lately in Colorado," Slender Bud observed.

"Say, pards, what is to prevent us from jumping the claim?" asked Missouri Johnny.

"We will seize right onto it and if Colorado objects—which of course he will—we kin lay him out."

"He's a good man, I know, but we are three to one and if we can't do him up, then we are a lot of chumps, that's all!"

Both of the others shook their heads in disapprobation of the scheme.

They were more far-sighted and keener-witted than their companion, who was the "bouncer" of the saloon; that is, it was his business to keep order and eject by means, more or less violent, any visitors who manifested a disposition to kick up a row.

"Oh, no, Missouri, that little game would never work in this camp," Crooked Pat O'Neal replied.

"Such a thing might be done in the old days on the extreme edge of the frontier, but we are too durned near civilization for the scheme to work hyer."

"That is the correct lay-out!" Slender Bud exclaimed with an approving nod.

"If we should salivate Colorado and capture the mine in any such high-handed manner as you propose, Missouri, we should have the whole camp about our ears."

"Why, I would be willing to go ten to one that the three of us would be either shot or strung up to the handiest tree within four-and-twenty hours after we made the capture—yes, sir-ee, I would go twenty to one, and, as a betting man, I wouldn't want any better investment for my money."

Missouri Johnny nodded in a mournful sort of way.

"I reckon you hev got the thing down fine," he observed, "but if we don't go for the claim in some sich way, I don't see how we kin get our hooks on it."

"It's a difficult job, of course; there's no two ways about that!" the Creole admitted.

"And that is the reason why I thought O'Neal's idea of getting old man Jackson to go for Colorado worth the trying."

"If the half-breed was done for, then the claim is in the market, and we have as good a right to jump in and go for it as anybody else. It would then be a fair fight and the best men could win."

"If we had any shadow of a claim we could make a struggle, and the camp would hold off its hands, but we haven't got any claim, and I don't see how we could possibly get one."

The others shook their heads, for the riddle was too much for them.

At this moment a customer came into the saloon without in such a boisterous manner as to attract the attention of the pards.

"Give me a drink!" the man cried, "and hyer's my last coin!"

"By the eternal mountains!" the Creole exclaimed, "it's Teddy Flynn, the man who struck the Pine Creek Claim!"

CHAPTER XI.

A BOLD SCHEME.

THE three sports looked at each other rather astonished at this unexpected appearance.

Teddy Flynn was about the last man in the world whom they expected to see; and it certainly was strange that the man, who had announced when he departed from the camp, after sticking the tenderfoot with the played-out mine—as he supposed—that he had shaken the dust of Bitteropolis from his feet forever, should make his appearance just as the three were engaged in discussing ways and means to gain possession of the now valuable Pine Creek Claim.

Teddy Flynn was a decided character of Irish descent, as his name indicated, yet there was little about him to suggest the place of his birth, being a thin-faced, ugly little man with fiery-red hair and a beard of the same hue.

He had not borne the best reputation during his sojourn in Bitteropolis, as he was regarded as an utterly unscrupulous man, who was not particular how he got money as long as he got it; not that any one ever thought he would resort to violence to accomplish his ends, for he was not possessed of pluck enough to try anything of that kind.

He was merely a low, mean, common trickster.

Back again he had come to Bitteropolis and from his speech, addressed to the barkeeper, it was evident that the world had gone wrong with him.

"Yes, barkeeper, I think as much of you folks hyer as any men I ever run across," Flynn continued. "And in proof of it I've come in hyer, the first shebang whose doors I have darkened since I struck the town, to blow in my last coin for a drink, and that's the kind of man I am! You can size me all up and you will find me all wool and a yard wide!"

Flynn had evidently been drinking, and although it made him a little free and careless in his speech, yet that was almost all the effect it produced, for Flynn was one of those peculiar men who never drink liquor enough to utterly lose control of themselves.

In fact the majority of his acquaintances declared that the more "firewater" Teddy Flynn drank the more crafty, cunning and rascally he became.

Before Teddy Flynn had finished his speech, a bright idea had flashed into the head of Slender Bud.

"It is all right, pards!" he exclaimed, rapidly. "Teddy Flynn's appearance in Bitteropolis just at this moment gives us the Pine Creek Mine!"

The others stared in astonishment, but from the confident way in which the Creole spoke they understood that he had a plan in his head which he considered would prove successful.

"Yes, sir-ee," he continued, "the chances are a thousand to one that we can make the raffle now, but we must put a stop to Teddy Flynn's shooting his mouth off in that durned keerless way!"

Slender Bud hastened to the door as he spoke, opened it, and stuck his head out into the saloon.

"Hello! is that you, Teddy Flynn, or your ghost?" he exclaimed.

The new-comer was just reaching for the bottle of whisky which the bartender had placed upon the counter when the words of Slender Bud fell upon his ears.

Turning, he exclaimed:

"Well, now, old man, you kin bet all your wealth that it ain't ary spook that is going for your benzine in this free and easy manner!"

"No, sir, I'm all flesh and blood! alive and kicking, and worth jest a dozen dead men!"

"Well, I'm right glad to see you, old man!" Slender Bud cried, in the most cordial manner.

"Never mind that whisky! Pick up your ducat and come in hyer and have a drink with us!"

"All right! I'm yer man and glad of the chance!" replied Flynn.

"I ain't got so much wealth as to be keerless how I throw my chucks away!"

Taking up the coin which he had cast upon the counter, Flynn entered the private apartment of the three pards.

Slender Bud closed the door after him while Crooked Pat O'Neal produced a bottle of whisky and some glasses from a closet in the corner of the apartment.

O'Neal had quickly taken his cue from the Creole, although, shrewd as he was, he had not

succeeded in guessing aught in regard to the design which had so suddenly flashed into the mind of Slender Bud. He understood, though, that the game was to treat the new-comer in the most hospitable manner possible, and so he welcomed him as though he had been one of his nearest and dearest friends.

Flynn was rather astonished at the warmth of his greeting, for although he had been a regular patron of the Silver Moon Saloon, yet being a careful, crafty fellow he had never spent much money there; or in any other saloon either for that matter.

And when he was greeted so warmly by the three pards, he at once fell to wondering in regard to the reason, and, as was only natural in such a man, the only conclusion he could come to was that they thought he was "well-fixed" and were eager to get a chance at his money.

Slender Bud immediately undeceived him in regard to this point though.

"Help yourself to the whisky, old man," he said, as he placed a chair for Teddy Flynn's accommodation and then pushed the bottle over to him.

"Don't be afraid of the fluid! It is a little better quality than the benzine we sell over the bar and a man can h'ist in ten or twelve drinks without danger of getting a head on him as big as a bushel basket."

"I heard the little racket you were giving the barkeeper, and though we three go in for making a dollar whenever we can, yet when it comes to an old customer we don't care to take his last coin when he is in hard luck."

This declaration was as welcome as it was unexpected, and Teddy Flynn immediately came to the conclusion that the three sports were pretty decent fellows.

"Here's my respects, gentlemen," he said as he drank his whisky, the rest keeping him company.

"Sorry to hear that you haven't been striking pay-dirt since you left Bitteropolis," Crooked Pat O'Neal remarked.

"I've had the worst kind of luck!"

"Too bad!" Slender Bud exclaimed.

"Awful rough!" cried Missouri Johnny.

"You know I had quite a little stake when I lit out?"

"Yes, the money you got out of the tenderfoot, Williams, for the Pine Creek Claim," Slender Bud observed.

"Yes, I stuck that old galoot pretty badly!" and Teddy Flynn chuckled as he reflected upon the cute way in which he had cheated the stranger.

"Lemme see," remarked Slender Bud, reflectively, "you got five hundred dollars out of him, didn't you?"

"Yes, five hundred, exactly, and, gentlemen, I give you my word I wasn't making ten dollars a week out of the mine!"

"I suppose you know that the old man took a pard soon after he got the claim, a fellow called Cool Colorado, a practical miner with a deal of experience, and, thanks to his skill, the claim has been doing well."

"You don't say so!" said Flynn, in surprise. "Then I didn't strike the old man so badly after all."

"Oh, no, you sold the mine cheap. I suppose you know the old man is dead?"

No, Flynn hadn't heard of it, so Slender Bud told the story of the tragedy, but he was careful not to reveal to Flynn what a bonanza the claim had turned out to be.

"I ought to have held on to it!" Flynn exclaimed, regretfully.

"Yes, but your head was level when you made the agreement with Williams that you were to have the privilege of buying back the mine at any time within a year by paying a hundred dollars bonus."

"Eh!" exclaimed Flynn, in astonishment.

"That was the agreement, wasn't it? and now hearing that the mine is doing well you have come to buy it back, I suppose."

"What on earth are you talking about?" cried Flynn. "Who told you any such cock-and-bull story?"

"Why you did yourself!"

"I did?"

"Yes, and what is more, you gave me the agreement to keep."

"The blazes I did!"

"Well, that is what you said when you gave me the sealed envelope. You said the agreement was inside of it, and that is all I know."

"Say, I reckon you have been dreaming, or else I was drunk and didn't know what I was talking about."

"Oh, no, you wasn't drunk!" Slender Bud replied. "You knew what you were about well

enough. These gents were present and heard the whole thing, didn't you, boys?"

Crooked Pat O'Neal and Missouri Johnny immediately declared that they remembered the whole circumstance as well as though it was only yesterday.

O'Neal by this time had guessed the scheme which the fertile brain of the Creole had evolved, and although the bouncer, less keen-witted, had not, yet he understood that some deep game was on foot and he was expected to aid it by all means within his power.

"Oh, it's all right of course, but I must have been clean off my nut to say such a thing!" Teddy Flynn observed, completely puzzled.

"Well, you seemed to be all right. You said you wrote the agreement out and the old man signed it willingly enough. I suppose you would know his handwriting if you saw it?" Slender Bud asked.

"You bet! He wrote me two letters 'bout the thing afore we came to terms."

"Have you got those letters?" The question was put in a careless, off-hand way, but Crooked Pat O'Neal readily understood how important it was.

"Oh, no; they were destroyed long ago, but I would know Williams's writing anywhere. He wrote an elegant hand, jest like print, you know."

"Like the printed writing that is on cards sometimes?" asked the Creole.

"Yes, that is it."

"Why, I write a hand like that," then Slender Bud got pen, ink and paper and wrote in most beautiful characters, like copper-plate, the name:

"ALEXANDER WILLIAMS."

It was not the Creole's usual way of writing, but he was a magnificent penman and could imitate almost any handwriting.

"That is it!" cried Flynn, "that's old Williams's fist to a hair!"

And then a sudden idea flashed upon him—he comprehended the plot.

"I reckon I did give you the agreement," he said with a grin. "And if I swear to it and we git the mine what am I to have?"

"One-eighth interest!" Slender Bud replied, promptly.

"I'm yer man!" Teddy Flynn cried.

"You fetch out the agreement and I will swear to it through thick and thin!"

"That gives us the mine!" Crooked Pat O'Neal observed, "and if Cool Colorado objects we'll wipe him out!"

CHAPTER XII.

JACKSON IS ROPED IN.

JACKSON was in a terribly bad humor when he reached his cabin, and he proceeded to lay down the law to his daughter.

"See hyer, do you know whar I have been?" he inquired.

"No, father, how should I know?" the girl replied, but she saw from his appearance that he had been in trouble.

The awful blow between the eyes which he had received from Cool Colorado had produced the usual result of a stroke administered in that particular spot, and now the old man could show as complete a pair of "black eyes" as mortal ever displayed.

And in addition, Jackson felt sore all over—the natural consequence of the pounding which he had received.

"Wa-al, I've been out to have a talk with that scoundrel of a Colorado, and it is all your fault, too!" he cried, savagely.

The girl was not lacking in spirit, and she resisted the speech.

"I don't see what I have to do with it!" she exclaimed.

"I am sure I didn't tell you to go or want you to, and if you got into a quarrel with this young man it is not my fault."

Just then the old man, having seated himself happened to catch sight of his face in the little looking-glass which his daughter, with the usual instincts of womankind, had hung up by the side of the one window which gave light to the apartment.

For a moment the old man, with a doleful face, surveyed his disfigured countenance, and then he broke out in a torrent of oaths, much to the horror of his daughter, who had never seen him so angry before.

In vain were all her attempts to soothe him; he swore by everything he could think of, good or bad, that he would "go" for Cool Colorado that very night with a gun and shoot him on sight, and he also warned his daughter that if he ever caught her exchanging a word with the

scoundrel who had so ill-used him, he would certainly do her a mortal injury.

The girl was naturally indignant, the more so as she was convinced that her father had been entirely to blame in the quarrel.

"I guess if you had let the young man alone and minded your own business, that he would not have troubled you!" she exclaimed, tartly.

"Let him alone!" cried old Jackson, angrily; "do you s'pose I was going to let 'em throw this miserable galoot up in my teeth as being a better man than I was? I want you to understand I was the boss of the town, and when this Cool Colorado came to the fore, I had to lay him out or give up calling myself a chief."

"Well, I think you had better give it up!" Polly responded. "I don't think that it is nice for men to go around challenging each other to fight, just like a lot of bulldogs."

"Oh, shut up! Wot do you women know about such matters, anyway? But I will get squar' with the galoot afore he is many days older."

"He is mighty handy with his fists and his wrestling tricks, but jest wait until I git arter him with a gun, and see if I don't make him hump himself," and then the old man broke out into such a fit of violent swearing that the girl in affright was driven out of the apartment.

After having had a nap old Jackson felt better, though, and partook of his supper in a comparatively peaceful state of mind.

The old man did not wake up until late, and it was eight o'clock before supper was over; then the girl, after clearing the table, said she was going to pay a visit to Mrs. Stark, a neighbor who lived in the first cabin down the trail toward the camp.

"I hain't got no objection," said the old man, "but don't go down to the town, whar you'll hev any chance of seeing that galoot, for I'm dead set ag'in' him, an' I'm sart'in to lay him out one of these days."

The girl replied that she had no intention of going anywhere except to Mrs. Stark and then departed.

Five minutes after she left there came a knock at the door, and when old man Jackson went to see what was wanted he found the three Silver Moon sports and Teddy Flynn.

"Walk in, gen'lemen, walk in; I'm right glad to see you!" Jackson exclaimed.

After the four entered the house and seated themselves, Crooked Pat O'Neal took a look around and said:

"We have come on a leetle matter of business, Jackson, and I s'pose, afore we get at it, its as well to be sure that what we say won't be carried all over the town."

"Oh, that is all right," the other replied, confidently, "there ain't ary soul in the house but myself."

"Your daughter lives hyer with you, doesn't she?" asked the sport, with a suspicious glance about him, just as if, despite the old man's statement, he expected to see Polly Jackson lurking in some corner.

"Yes, but she is not in the house. She went out ten or fifteen minutes ago to pay a visit to one of the neighbors, Mrs. Stark, who lives down the trail, and she won't be back for an hour or so, for when two women get together thar's allers a heap of talking to be done."

"You are sure then there isn't any danger of our conversation being overheard?" Crooked Pat O'Neal queried.

"Sart'in! thar ain't the least possibility of it."

"Because we have come to have a little talk with you on a mighty important business matter, and if our conversation should be overheard by any spy, and the thing get out, all the fat would be in the fire."

"Don't you worry 'bout that!" old Jackson rejoined in the most confident manner possible.

"You kin shoot off yer mouth all you like and no one will be any the wiser for it."

Thus assured, Crooked Pat O'Neal introduced Teddy Flynn to Jackson.

"Mebbe you have heard of Mr. Flynn before, seeing as he used to hang out in Bitteropolis," the chief of the three suggested.

Jackson shook his head.

"No, I never heered of the gen'leman afore."

"He used to own the Pine Creek Claim, the mine, you know, that Cool Colorado is interested in," the sharp explained.

Old man Jackson gritted his teeth together the moment he heard the name of his foe.

"Durn that galoot!" he exclaimed. "I've got the worst kind of a grudge ag'in' him an' I reckon I will have to go gunnin' round the camp arter a gen'leman 'bout his size 'fore long."

"Well it was in reference to Colorado and his

mine that we came to see you to-night," observed Crooked Pat O'Neal.

"I reckon thar's going to be a leetle trouble 'bout the mine, and I kinder had an idea that you would like to take a hand in the fun."

"You kin just bet I would if it is going to give me a chance to get a whack at this mud-colored galoot!"

"Oh, I reckon you will get all the chance you want!" Slender Bud exclaimed, and Missouri Johnny chimed in with an emphatic, "that's so!"

"I can explain the whole business to you in a brace of shakes," said the chief of the three pards.

"Mister Flynn hyer got kinder dissatisfied with the mine and Alex Williams, happening to come along and take a fancy to the property, pressed him to sell."

"Mister Flynn wasn't particularly anxious, you know, but as the other fellow was so hot after it, finally, he agreed to let him have it for five hundred dollars, but he made Williams sign an agreement that if he, Flynn, wanted the property again within one year he could have it by paying back the purchase money—the five hundred, you know—and a hundred dollars in addition as a bonus."

"Yes, yes, I see," and old Jackson nodded his head, sagely.

"And I must say that it was a mighty smart thing for you to do, Mister Flynn, to get old Williams to sign that agreement, for I heered talk on the street to-day that that Pine Creek Claim was worth fifty thousand dollars of any man's money!"

Flynn looked amazed, for this was the first intimation he had received that the mine was worth any such sum.

He looked at the three sports, and they smiled, for they had Teddy Flynn securely held by writings, and it was too late for him to "kick" and demand a higher share.

He consoled himself with the thought that if it had not been for their cunning wits he would not have stood any chance to derive the least profit from the affair.

"Hyer's the agreement, all right," Crooked Pat O'Neal remarked, producing a written paper and giving it to old man Jackson.

He perused it carefully, then handed it back with the remark:

"It seems to me that the matter is as straight as a string."

"Yes; but this half-breed, who is now in possession of the mine, will likely be inclined to show fight," Slender Bud observed.

"The chances are big, you know, that Williams never said anything to him about this agreement, and when we come to demand the mine he will be apt to show fight."

"I shouldn't be a mite surprised, for he's an ugly snake!" Jackson declared.

"We three have gone in with Mister Flynn in this speculation," the Creole explained.

"The property is rich enough to stand a company, and so we have formed one," he continued. "I own a quarter, and each of my pards here has a quarter, Mister Flynn an eighth, and there is one eighth left which we reckoned that, mebbe, you would like to take."

"Sart'in!" cried old man Jackson, promptly; "that is, if you ain't fixed the ante too high."

"We have bonded the mine at sixty thousand dollars, but if you want an eighth interest, you needn't pay but a thousand in and let the rest come out of your share of the profits."

"Good enuff! Count me in!" the old man cried.

The three acted shrewdly in securing the co-operation of Jackson, for he was recognized as a square and honest man, and had a number of friends who would be apt to side with him if there was a fight for the possession of the Pine Creek property.

"Well, we are glad you see fit to go in with us, for we don't think Colorado has treated you right, and now you will have a chance to square the matter," Crooked Pat O'Neal observed.

"To-morrow we are going to demand the surrender of the mine."

"He won't give it up—he'll fight!" old Jackson asserted.

"Then we will go for him red-hot, and if he gets hurt there will be no one to blame but himself!"

And with this significant declaration, the interview ended.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

As a rule, men who delight in positive assertions, without taking the trouble to inform themselves surely regarding the matter in hand, are generally wrong.

And so it was in this case in regard to old man Jackson's positive declaration that there wasn't the least danger of any one playing the spy upon the conversation between him and his visitors.

He relied upon the fact that he had seen his daughter depart and had not witnessed her return.

But she had returned though.

To tell the truth, Polly Jackson had fallen deeply in love with the young and handsome Cool Colorado.

It was a case of love at first sight.

Many a man had sought to win the favor of her smiles, for such girls as the blooming Polly are few and far between in the wild western land, but until she encountered the dashing half-breed the maiden had never looked upon the face of a man whom she cared to see again.

It is an old saying that the course of true love never runs smooth, and certainly the adage seemed to be correct in this instance, for although the young miner had never told the girl that he was smitten with her charms in words, yet his eyes had spoken, and Polly felt sure that he was as much impressed with her as she was with him.

But as neither had spoken of love to the other, it could not be justly said that there was a love affair between them, and, therefore, the girl felt that her father's reproaches were terribly unjust.

Then too, if she and Cool Colorado were lovers, it would tend to make the young man anxious to be on good terms with her father instead of bad.

So her conscience acquitted her of the charge of being in any way the cause of the ill-feeling between the two men.

She knew by experience that her father was inclined to be ugly when he had been drinking and, being proud of the gifts in the physical line which nature had bestowed upon him, he was much more likely to seek a quarrel than to endeavor to avoid one.

It was an easy matter for her to decide then that in this trouble between her father and Cool Colorado the blame was entirely on the side of the old man.

She was heated and excited from meditating over the matter when she left the house and just in the mood to do something desperate.

It was only about five minutes' walk to the cabin of the neighbor whom she intended to visit and she had just reached it when her attention was attracted by the sound of men's voices, coming from the other side of the house, around which the trail led.

The cabins concealed the men from her view, but it was evident that they were so near at hand that she could not hope to get into the house before they came up.

The girl was in no mood for conversation, and knowing that if any of the new-comers chanced to be acquainted with her they would be certain to stop for the purpose of exchanging a few playful remarks, she hastened to get behind the cabin so as to avoid them.

The desire succeeded, the party—it was the three Silver Moon pards and Teddy Flynn—passed by without the slightest suspicion regarding the proximity of the girl.

And as the men passed by the cabin Teddy Flynn was uncautious enough to remark:

"We will rope the old man Jackson in to a dead certainty and then we'll make the half-breed skip the gutter!"

"Hush!" continued Crooked Pat O'Neal, "don't be shooting off your mouth so freely. A still tongue makes a wise head!"

Then the party passed out of hearing.

But the girl had heard enough to give her to understand that the men were on their way to see her father to get him to join in some plot which was designed to work harm to the man she loved.

Under such circumstances the girl did not hesitate long in regard to what she should do.

At all risks she must overhear the interview between the men and her father—she must be able to learn the details of the plot, so as to warn Cool Colorado of the exact nature of the danger that threatened him.

Therefore with the cautious steps of the wild beast stealing upon its prey, Polly Jackson made her way back to the cabin.

There was an excavation under the house, where the original builder had started in to make a cellar, but had given the task up as a bad job before he had half completed it.

Polly knew that by concealing herself in this tunnel she would be able to overhear all that was said in the room above.

As the reader has seen, the girl succeeded in her plan.

She overheard every word of the conversation.

without the conspirators having the slightest suspicion that any one was playing the spy upon them.

After the four visitors departed, the girl crept from the tunnel and, retiring to a safe distance from the house, so as to evade discovery in case her father should happen to come to the door, sat down upon a rock to deliberate over a plan of action.

The plot which had been so craftily formed was certain to succeed, in her opinion, and the half-breed would be taken by surprise, and probably killed, unless she could manage in some way to warn him of the danger which threatened.

But could it be done?

Who in the town could she trust to carry such an important message?

She shook her head in despair.

There wasn't a soul whom she would dare to ask.

And then the bright thought flashed into her mind that she could go herself.

But she was ignorant of the exact location of the mine, and the trail which must be taken to reach it.

Mrs. Stark would probably know though, and Polly thought that by some skilfully put questions she could obtain the information she desired without arousing the woman's suspicions.

There was no time to be lost and the girl hurried away at once.

Fortune favored Polly, for as she approached the house Mrs. Stark came to the door, thinking she heard some one knock, so Polly was not obliged to enter to have speech with the woman, and time was saved.

"Going to the camp?" Mrs. Stark asked.

"Yes."

"If you hear anything new 'bout that dreadful Pine Creek murder I do hope you'll stop and tell me when you come back!"

"Oh, I will; but where is the Pine Creek Mine and how do you go to it?"

"Straight up the trail along Bitter Creek until you come to Pine Creek, which is the first creek, and the mine is the first one up the creek."

"Lors! I've been wanting to go thar ever since I heered of the dreadful thing, and, if you like, we will go up there together to-morrow or next day."

"Yes, that will be wise—good-night!" and Polly hurried on, but as soon as Mrs. Stark closed the door she turned and retraced her steps, for she was going away from the mine.

This was the Bitter Creek trail, and she must go north instead of south.

She knew that the Pine Creek Mine was north of her father's house, for it was in passing the cabin where she lived that Cool Colorado had chanced to encounter her.

It was a lonesome way, but the moon was up and afforded the venturesome girl light, so that it was not as desolate as it would have been if utter darkness had reigned.

Polly hurried forward with wonderful speed, and as the road was tolerably good she succeeded in reaching the cabin of the half-breed in less than an hour.

The light streaming from the chink over the door showed that the occupant was at home.

Well-nigh breathless from her haste, Polly knocked on the door.

Warned by the fate which had befallen his pard on account of his heedlessly opening the door, Cool Colorado did not unbar the portal, but first sought to ascertain who it was that craved admittance.

In reply to his demand to know who was there, the girl replied:

"I want to speak to you on some important business, Mr. Colorado!" she replied. "It's Polly Jackson."

Considerably astonished at this information, the young man hastened to remove the bar which fastened the door and gave admittance to the maiden.

Polly was trembling with excitement when she entered the cabin, and Cool Colorado, perceiving the girl's condition, hastened to provide a chair and a glass of water for her.

"Just wait a moment until I get my breath!" she exclaimed, "and I will tell you all about it!"

"It is an awful long distance up here and I believe I ran almost every step of the way!"

"The errand then that brought you must be an important one," Cool Colorado observed.

"It is indeed—to you, for I come to warn you of a plot that threatens, not only your mining property here, but your very life!"

The half-breed was amazed, and after thanking the girl for her great interest in his behalf, besought her to explain.

As briefly as possible, she told the story of the plot which had been concocted by the three Silver Moon sports and Teddy Flynn to take the Pine Creek Claim from him, and how they had bribed her father by the offer of a one-eighth interest to take a share in it.

Tears came into her beautiful eyes as she described how her father had willingly entered into the scheme.

Cool Colorado perceived her emotion and tried to console her.

"Don't feel badly about the matter," he said. "All men make mistakes sometimes in their lives, and your father has, unfortunately, taken a violent dislike to me, and it is not my fault either. I didn't want to quarrel with him, but he forced the fight on me; for your sake I spared him all I could and I will again."

Then, taking a seat by the girl, he passed his arms around her waist, while her head reclined on his shoulder, and he made the sweet confession of his love which she was so willing to hear.

Only a few moments though did she yield to the blissful influences of love's young dream, then starting up, she said she must return lest her long absence should arouse suspicion.

But she went not home alone.

Cool Colorado accompanied her until she was within sight of her father's cabin, and then, with a last embrace, they parted.

It was after eleven when the girl entered the cabin, but old man Jackson had been paying attention to a bottle of whisky, and therefore took no heed of the passage of time, so the girl was not closely cross-examined in regard to her long visit, Jackson's only thoughts being of the morrow when he would have an opportunity to wreak vengeance upon his foe, the daring, powerful, skillful Cool Colorado, who had beaten him in so easy a manner.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PLOTTERS ARE SURPRISED.

BRIGHT and early the next morning the conspirators met, according to agreement, at a certain big rock about a half a mile up the trail beyond old man Jackson's cabin.

It was arranged that the five should meet at this point, which was well outside the camp, so as not to excite any suspicions, which would be sure to spring up if the miners saw five men, armed to the teeth, marching through the camp.

It would be guessed at once that the five were on the "war-path," and a crowd would be sure to follow them in order to see what they were up to.

Now this was just what the conspirators did not want.

They didn't require any witnesses to the little game which they contemplated playing, and so took all possible precautions that no one in the camp should have any idea of what they were going to do.

All five were not only armed with revolvers and knives after the usual miner fashion, but also carried rifles.

The four who came from the camp proceeded in couples, and took the precaution to strike off from the trail through the rough and broken country to the eastward as though they were in search of game.

Old man Jackson, eager for a chance to get at his foe, was the first one to reach the meeting place.

Crooked Pat O'Neal and Teddy Flynn came next, and five minutes afterward Slender Bud and Missouri Johnny made their appearance.

Little time was lost in words, for all were anxious to get at the business in hand, and in a few moments after Slender Bud and Missouri Johnny came up, the party started, and went forward at a good pace.

Little was said during the march, but when the party left the Bitter Creek trail and turned into that which ran along Pine Creek, Crooked Pat O'Neal let fall a few words of caution.

"Look to your weapons, boys," he said. "See that they are all right, and in good condition, for this half-breed is a desperate fellow, and if he takes it into his head to show fight—and the chances are that he will, although the odds are big against him we can't afford to have any misfires, for it would be apt to cost some one of us his life."

The rest hastened to assure Crooked Pat that they fully comprehended this fact, and then every man made a careful examination of his arms so as to be sure that each piece was in perfect working order.

Just before they came in sight of the half-breed's cabin Slender Bud called a halt for the purpose of deliberating how best to make the attack.

And when he put the question:

"Now then, gents, which is the best way to do this trick?"

One and all looked at each other as though troubled to answer.

Crooked Pat O'Neal broke the silence by saying:

"Give us your idea, Bud; you have the best head for a thing of this kind of any man in the party."

"Well, my notion is that we had better surprise our game," Slender Bud replied.

"I think the chances are a million to one if we give Cool Colorado the chance he will fight like a devil, and, as he always goes armed to the teeth, the odds are big that some one of us will be apt to get hurt in the skirmish."

There wasn't one in the party who judged it wise to dispute this statement.

"Now if we find him inside of the cabin we must creep up quietly, knock, and when he opens the door jump on him."

"But suppose he is outside?" Crooked Pat O'Neal asked.

"He may be down at the creek, you know, working on his claim."

"Well, in that case we must scout in quietly and surround him, then make a sudden dash."

"He will pull on us, of course, but we may be able to lay him out before he can do much damage."

The plan seemed to be a good one and all were willing to try it.

They went on for a few hundred yards and then, as they were approaching the neighborhood of the cabin, proceeded with extreme caution.

Finally they reached a point from whence they could command a view of the Pine Creek Claim, but the cabin was hidden from view on account of a bend in the trail.

The half-breed was not in sight, so it was plain he was not at work.

"He is in the cabin, evidently, and we will be able to surprise him!" Slender Bud exclaimed.

The gang passed around the bend of the trail and came in sight of the cabin; then the surprise and disgust of the party can be imagined when they discovered the man they sought, seated on a low rock, with his back against a huge boulder, and flanked by other bowlders to the right and left, so that it was a clear impossibility to either surround or to attack him in the rear.

Upon his lap he held his rifle, and his hands were playing carelessly with the lock.

He was on the watch, for he discovered the new-comers just as soon as they came in sight.

The plotters halted, uncertain what to do.

The three Silver Moon pards were too old birds not to suspect, from the nature of the circumstances, that their plan had miscarried.

In some mysterious way the half-breed had got a knowledge of their purpose, and was fully prepared to receive them.

He had stationed himself in a strong position, too, one where it was impossible for attackers to secure "cover" in advancing upon him.

"Well, our cake is all dough now, as far as a surprise goes," Slender Bud remarked.

"Yes, we'll have to chin a little with him and see if he will not listen to reason," Crooked Pat O'Neal remarked.

"We can lay him out, of course, but we will be apt to lose some men in the fight, and, mebbe, when he sees that we mean business, he may be willing to come to some kind of an arrangement."

"If he don't, why, we will kill him, that's all!" Slender Bud exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, that's the talk!" old man Jackson cried. He hadn't had any breakfast, for he had stolen from the house without awakening his daughter, but in lieu of eatables he had finished the bottle of whisky, which he had been enjoying on the previous evening, and the result of this tipping upon an empty stomach was that he was pretty well "under the weather."

Teddy Flynn was getting uneasy; he did not like the appearance of things.

On the previous evening, when the plotters had decided that they would seize the mine and if Cool Colorado resisted they would kill him, the scheme seemed to be perfectly feasible, for were they not five to one?

But now that the five and the one were face to face, with arms in their hands, it did not seem to be near so easy a job as it had appeared when the matter was discussed and determined upon.

"Bud, will you talk to him or shall I?" Crooked Pat O'Neal asked.

"I reckon I had better do the talking," Slender Bud replied.

"The cat is out of the bag evidently. He knows that we ain't come for the sole purpose

of saying good-morning to him, and if we try to pull the wool over his eyes we will only lose our time."

Then, giving his rifle to Crooked Pat O'Neal to hold, Slender Bud advanced toward the half-breed.

Not a movement of the others had escaped the keen eyes of Cool Colorado, and when he saw this action on the part of the gambler he too laid aside his rifle.

If the Silver Moon man intended any treachery—if the laying aside of the rifle was designed to throw him off his guard—and Slender Bud's idea was to get near enough to close in with him, such a weapon as the rifle would be in the way.

In Cool Colorado's belt was his trusty ten-inch bowie-knife, which was, in the experienced hands of such a man as he, worth a dozen rifles in a hand-to-hand encounter.

"Good-morning," said the gambler, politely, as he came up to the half-breed.

"Good-morning," responded Cool Colorado as he rose to his feet.

Slender Bud noticed the muscular proportions of the other, and his quick eyes did not fail to see the knife placed so handily to the half-breed's grasp, and the gambler was too old a warrior not to understand that if he tried any "monkey tricks" with the other, Cool Colorado could easily knife him long before he could get a revolver out and prepare it for action.

"We have come to see you on a little matter of business, this morning, Colorado," Slender Bud remarked in the most pleasant manner possible.

"Yes, when I caught sight of your party I reckoned you were out more for business than pleasure."

Slender Bud guessed from this remark that his suspicion in regard to the half-breed anticipating danger was earnest.

"Rather a disagreeable bit of business."

"Go ahead and get through with it then as quickly as possible."

"Do you know Teddy Flynn yonder?"

"Is he the man who used to own this mine?"

"Yes."

"No, I don't know him personally, but I have heard of him."

And as he spoke the half-breed took a good look at the speculator, as if he was anxious to size him up, as the saying is, and see what kind of a man he was.

"Well, he used to own this mine, as you say; sold it to Williams, you know."

"Yes."

"And it seems that when he sold the mine he made an agreement with Alex Williams that he was to have the right to buy the mine back again at any time within a year by refunding the purchase money and a hundred dollars in addition."

"The man lies!" cried Cool Colorado, promptly. "He lies and he knows he lies! There was no such agreement."

"How do you know anything about it? You were not in the camp at the time of the sale," questioned the gambler in his smoothest way.

"Flynn gave a warrantee deed and the deed was delivered and the money paid in the presence of witnesses."

"He's got it in black and white!"

"It's a fraud! What is the consideration? Such an agreement, if it was honest, wouldn't amount to anything without a consideration."

"But the whole thing is a lie! Didn't Flynn boast all over town about how badly he had stuck the tenderfoot?"

"Well, he is a rather keener talker."

"I own one-half of this claim and I am ready to fight for what is mine to the last gasp."

"But I will make Flynn a fair offer; let him step out and I will meet him in single fight! If he downs me he is welcome to my half of the mine."

"Flynn has bonded the mine and all of us here are interested. It is not one man but five you must fight."

"You are all going for me then?" Cool Colorado asked.

CHAPTER XV.

NOT SO UNEVEN AFTER ALL.

Slender Bud looked the young man full in the face as the half-breed put the question, and he thought to himself that he was rightly named when men called him "Cool," for there wasn't a trace of excitement visible.

He was taking the matter as calmly as though the five intruders had come to invite him to a picnic instead of to a hostile meeting.

"Well, of course you know how things of this kind are generally settled in this region," Slender Bud remarked.

"Flynn claims the mine. The paper he produces seems to my pards and myself to be all right and regular, and we have put up our wealth on it."

"In plain words, you are going to jump the claim and you bring this forged paper forward as an excuse for so doing?"

"As I said, the paper seems to be all straight, and if it isn't, I suppose it will be a matter for the legal sharks to fight in the courts."

"You propose to capture the mine and have the lawyers and the courts settle the legality of the matter afterward?"

"Yes, I reckon that is about the size of our say-so!" Slender Bud remarked.

"And if it comes to a law fight just you bear in mind the old legal saying that possession is nine points of the law!" the gambler added, grimly.

"Ah, but you hav'n't got possession yet," responded the half-breed, as cool as a cucumber.

"No, but we soon will have, for you can't hope to make a successful fight against such odds."

"Five to one, eh?"

"Yes, that's the figure!"

"Hav'n't you made some mistake?"

Slender Bud looked at the other after he put the question in a doubtful way, for he didn't understand what he was driving at.

"It seems to me that is about it," he replied.

"But if you have any doubts, you had better count; I make the odds five to one."

"Oh, I don't think that they are as uneven as all that, hey, Pine Creek?"

And with the words, which the moment they were pronounced, the gambler understood were a signal, up from behind the rocks and bushes on the hillside popped Big-nosed Smith and a half-a-dozen of the miners from upper Pine Creek, all armed with rifles, with which they "covered" the intruders in a way that was extremely disagreeable to them.

The attackers had fallen into an ambush.

"You see, sport, you wasn't quite right in your statement," Cool Colorado remarked, after the abrupt appearance of the miners.

"The odds are not anywhere near as big as you think. When you come to count these pards of mine, you will see that it is a pretty even thing."

"The advantages is a leetle on my side, meb-be, but not very much, about eight to five, I think."

Slender Bud saw that he and his gang were in a trap, and for a moment, despite all his cool assurance, he was completely dumfounded, and what to do he knew not.

As for the rest, the sudden and unexpected appearance of the miners had taken all the fight out of both Teddy Flynn and old man Jackson.

Although the "Pride of Bitteropolis" was a little the worse for liquor, yet he had sense enough to know that under the present condition he and his party stood no chance in a fight, and he was not anxious to throw his life away.

"Well, what do you think of the thing now? How does the situation strike you?" Cool Colorado asked, perceiving that the gambler was in a quandary.

"Well, pard, there isn't any use to mince the matter," Slender Bud observed, slowly. "You have got us in a tight place, and I reckon the odds are big that you will win the game."

Smith and the miners were so near that the words of the Silver Moon man came to their ears and Smith at once made reply.

"Well, now, you kin bet all the money that you kin rake and scrape together that the 'turn' has been called on you, and I for one think that is about time that all such men as you ar' in this hyer camp of Bitteropolis ought to be presented with a hempen necktie and be given a chance to show how well they kin dance upon nothing."

The face of the gambler became fixed, for he recognized that he was in a position of great peril, but he was game—he was not the kind of man to show the white feather.

"Well, in regard to the hempen necktie and the dance upon nothing that you speak of," he observed, slowly. "I reckon that no one of us Silver Moon men is hankering arter anyt'ing of the kind."

"We are armed and we reckon we had just as lief go to the happy hunting grounds like men as to be strung up by the neck like a lot of dogs. So, if you mean business, hop in as soon as you please and we will do our best to keep our end up."

Both Teddy Flynn and old man Jackson listened in alarm to the words of the gambler.

Nothing was further from their thoughts than to attempt to fight the miners and so Flynn immediately cried out:

"Hold on! don't you count me in! I've gone jest as far in this affair as I want to travel! I'm beat, and I am willing to own up like a gentleman to it! I acknowledge the corn!"

"The leetle document which I gave to my friend hyer, Mister O'Neal, isn't the genuine article, but as I struck the camp dead broke, I wanted to make a raise somehow, and when I heered that thar had been a rich strike in this 'ar' Pine Creek Mine, I thought I saw a chance to make a stake."

"You are a thorough cur!" cried Slender Bud, in contempt.

Then old man Jackson improved the opportunity to speak.

"Fellow-citizens, I want you all to distinctly understand that I didn't know that thar was anything wrong 'bout this hyer matter!" he exclaimed.

"These gentlemen told me it was a good speculation and wanted me to jine in, and I will own right up that I wasn't sorry to git the chance to git squar' with Colorado, 'cos he and me hev had a couple of tussles already an' I didn't come out the top dog in the fight, but if thar is anything wrong in the matter, I don't know anything about it, an' I reckon these hyer Silver Moon gentlemen will bear witness that it is so."

The miners were impressed by old Jackson's manner with the belief that he was telling a straight story, and, after hesitating a moment, Slender Bud remarked:

"Although I don't think that it is quite the squar' thing for old man Jackson to go back on us arter joining in the picnic, yet I will give him the credit of saying that he is talking to you as straight as a string."

"If there is any skull-duggery in the matter, he knew nothing about it."

"Then, I reckon, since Flynn and old man Jackson crawfish out of this mess, that I shall have to hold one of you three Silver Moon sports to an account," the half-breed remarked sternly.

"I'm your mutton, Colorado!" cried Slender Bud defiantly.

"I'm not the kind of a man to crawl and play the cur when I am cornered."

"I did put up this job on you! I'll own right up, and this white-livered galoot of a Teddy Flynn was anxious enough to go into the affair, though he is so quick now to back out when the scheme has gone bu'st."

"You are the man who engineered the job?" Cool Colorado questioned.

"Yes, I am, and now I am ready to stand up and take the consequences like a man!" Slender Bud replied, showing more courage than any one had ever given him credit for possessing.

"You made a big strike hyer, and I made up my mind to have a finger in the pie by fair means or by foul."

"I wanted an excuse to jump your claim; Flynn came along—the devil sent him at the particular moment, I believe—and I thought that with his aid I could make the raffle."

"The speculation has gone bu'st, and now I am ready to stand up and take the consequences."

"Light out, then, you Flynn and old man Jackson!" Big-nosed Smith exclaimed, "and we'll go for this hyer picnic in two wags of a sheep's tail."

Flynn and the old man retreated at once; they waited not for a second bidding, but got away to a safe distance and there halted, anxious to witness the fight.

A look of grim determination appeared on the faces of the three Silver Moon sports.

They were human vermin, but like the things of prey whom they resembled, when cornered, they would turn and fight with the utmost desperation.

"Hold on a moment!" exclaimed Cool Colorado, when he beheld the warlike preparation.

"I want no man to risk his life in my behalf, unless it be absolutely necessary, and I do not think that in this case it is."

"This man here"—and with a nod he indicated Slender Bud—"acknowledges that he was the planner of this scheme."

"Let he and I then settle this trouble."

The gambler caught eagerly at the idea. An expert in the use of all weapons he did not fear even to meet a man who bore as great a reputation as a warrior as the half-breed.

"That suits me to a dot!" he exclaimed.

"As I am the man who got up the scheme, of course, I ought to be the one to face the music now."

"All right!" exclaimed the half-breed, as cool and impassible as ever.

"March off a hundred paces, draw your wea-

pon, turn and commence business as soon as you like."

This was certainly fair enough and Slender Bud expressed himself to that effect, then he wheeled about, strode his hundred paces, drew his revolver, and again faced the half-breed.

Cool Colorado was ready for him, his revolver out and the hammer raised.

The two were about a hundred feet apart, within range of such powerful weapons as the antagonists carried, for both were armed with the "navy" size revolvers so common on the frontier, not the toy-like tool which is usually carried in the midst of civilization.

A moment the two faced each other, and then their weapons slowly rose, and at precisely the same moment both pulled triggers.

Fortune favored the plainsman.

Slender Bud's weapon missed fire and Cool Colorado's bullet tore through his chest, inflicting a mortal wound.

The gambler gave a single gasp and then pitched forward on his forehead.

The fight was ended.

Crooked Pat O'Neal and Missouri Johnny expressed themselves as being satisfied and said that as their pard had fallen in a fair fight they bore no malice.

But to wind up their careers now, we will state that this event brought them in such evil repute in the camp that they were forced to sell out the Silver Moon Saloon and seek fresh fields in which to operate.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE TRAIL.

THE daring attempt to capture the mine had failed, but the scheme suggested a good idea to Cool Colorado. He was anxious to follow on the track of the murderer of his pard, but had been bothered in regard to how he should arrange his affairs so that the mine could be properly worked during his absence.

Now the way was clear. He "bonded" the mine—that is formed a joint-stock company to work it, letting Big-nosed Smith and his friends in for shares.

By this means he preserved Williams's half all right, and provided for the working of the claim while he was away.

This scheme too also raised ample money to enable him to follow on the track of the fugitive.

Cool Colorado had done a little detective business in his time, and he had guessed the dodge adopted by the assassin to baffle pursuit.

The white blaze in the forehead of the horse and the "three white stockings," had been deftly produced by the aid of paint.

By merely washing the paint off the whole appearance of the animal was changed.

The man was probably disguised too; the beard and hair were false, and by removing these the fellow became a different-looking man.

The half-breed's first move was to seek the toll-gate keeper on the Alpine road and get a description of all who had passed on horseback on the night of the murder.

By this time the toll-man had thought over the matter and refreshed his memory, and now told a different tale to that which he had delivered to the miners.

Five horsemen had passed that night, three strangers and two men with whom he was acquainted.

From the description of the strangers, and their beasts, it was plain to the half-breed, now so earnestly playing the part of a detective, that none of them could be the man he sought.

But one of the two whom the toll-man knew rode a chestnut horse, "nary blaze or white stockings though," the man declared.

Cool Colorado remembered the fellow the moment the man mentioned his name, although he was only acquainted with him by sight.

Captain Nick Spader he was called, and he had a small claim away up in the mountains, where Pine Creek rose.

Spader was a man well in years, with a grizzly gray beard and hair of the same hue, but he had a pleasant-looking face and a soft and winning way with him.

His reputation was an evil one, though, for he was an inveterate gambler and a hard drinker, and it was commonly believed that at some time in his past life he had been the captain of a desperate band of law-breakers; in fact, so little did his neighbors think of him that he was more often called "Old Nick" than anything else.

The moment that Cool Colorado learned that this man had passed through the toll-gate on the night of the murder, the suspicion came to him that he was the assassin.

Straight then to the captain's claim in the mountains went the half-breed.

As he anticipated, Old Nick had departed. He had sold out his claim, saying that he was going to the Pacific Slope.

"That means that he has gone in exactly the opposite direction!" Cool Colorado exclaimed to himself.

"He has gone East, undoubtedly, and I must follow him. Then I shall be able to kill two birds with one stone, for in the East I will look for Williams's daughter."

Knowing that he was likely to be gone for some time, he sought a farewell interview with the blooming Polly.

The girl protested that she would be true to him, no matter how long he might be gone, and, satisfied with this assurance, the half-breed detective took up the chase.

In Alpine he easily got on Captain Nick Spader's track, heard of him again at Salida, and again at Pueblo, for Old Nick was heading to the eastward, despite his statement that it was his intention to go to the land of the setting sun.

And in Pueblo, by accident, the tracker ran across a railroad man who knew Spader well, "the durndest biggest thief and scoundrel that ever escaped a white jail!" to repeat the graphic description given by the man of the steel rails.

He had been on board the train which had carried Old Nick from Pueblo, and Captain Spader had a "limited" ticket "right through to New York."

To New York then, the sleuth-hound hurried as fast as the iron horse could carry him.

In due time he arrived in the city.

During the journey he had procured a map and easily located Central Islip, a small hamlet on the Long Island Railroad.

In great Gotham the half-breed detective quickly realized how hopeless would be the chance of his finding the fugitive by depending upon himself alone and so he sought the aid of the police department.

The superintendent received him politely, listened to his story of the murder of Williams—his suspicions in regard to the slayer, and promised to put detectives on the track at once.

Making a memorandum of the particulars the chief remarked:

"Did I understand you to say that you think Williams was not the right name of the murdered man?"

"Yes, sir, for on the inside of his money-belt I found traced the name of Blarcomb."

"Blarcomb—Blarcomb!" remarked the superintendent in a reflective sort-of-way, "that's an odd, uncommon name, and it strikes me I have heard it before, and in connection with some man who was wanted too."

"Let me see!"

The superintendent unlocked one of the private drawers in his desk and took out a huge book, filled with newspaper clippings pasted in with written memoranda attached.

It was carefully indexed and the official soon found the name he wanted.

"Ah! yes, here it is, Blarcomb! I thought my memory hadn't played me false, although it is twenty odd years since I saw the name. The affair happened when I was a ward detective."

Then, turning to the page, the number of which was opposite to the name, the superintendent refreshed his memory by reading the newspaper clipping pasted in the book. "Yes, yes, I remember the affair now as distinctly as though it only happened yesterday," he said, after he had finished his perusal.

It created quite a commotion at the time.

"This man, Blarcomb, was a bank cashier—one of the trusted fellows, you know, who was so honest that none of the men whose duty it was to watch him ever thought it necessary to examine into the correctness of his figures, and the usual result followed. Mr. Blarcomb was among the missing one morning, and when the bank officials came to look into his affairs, they discovered, to their horror, that he had not only used up some fifty thousand dollars in cash, but, in his flight, had taken away securities which could be easily turned into money to the tune of sixty thousand dollars more."

"Immediate pursuit was given, but no trace of the man was ever discovered, and it was supposed that, in some clever disguise, the fellow had managed to escape to Brazil or some of the other South American countries."

"Oh, he was a daisy, this John Alexander Blarcomb!"

Cool Colorado started slightly.

"Why, Williams's name was Alexander!" he exclaimed.

And then he gave the chief an account of the

last moments of the old man, of his confession, and the request regarding his daughter Katherine.

"That is my man!" the chief exclaimed. "In this account, it describes him as a widower with a baby daughter named Katherine."

"But I say, what on earth did the fellow do with the sixty thousand dollars' worth of securities, and he must have had five or six thousand dollars' worth of cash besides?"

"I don't know; I never saw ought to indicate that he was particularly well off; but this confession, which he wanted me to attend to, and which the assassin carried off, might throw some light on the subject."

"Yes, it might. Suppose you go down to Central Islip and see if you can find the daughter," the superintendent suggested.

"It may be possible, you know, that the man who did the murder may have placed himself in communication with the girl, for he couldn't have the slightest suspicion, you know, that a Western man like yourself was hot on his track."

"It is a good idea, chief, and I will attend to the matter at once."

Cool Colorado was as good as his word, and a few hours later he got off the train at the little Long Island village.

Of the undersized, dried-up old man who was in charge of the railroad station, Cool Colorado inquired if he knew a Miss Katherine Blarcomb.

"Oh, yes," the station-master replied, immediately, with a curious glance at the stranger.

"Yes, yes, I've known Kate Blarcomb ever since she was born, and her mother before her, too. We used to go to school together."

"Were you acquainted with the Blarcombs?"

"With Mr. Blarcomb—John Alexander," the detective replied.

"I s'pose you know how he got into a heap of trouble 'bout twenty odd years ago?" the station-master observed with a mysterious air.

"The bank affair you mean?"

"Yes, wasn't it awful? But, do you know, folks 'round here didn't take much stock in him, anyway!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes, although he used to put on a heap of style. He married his wife in this town. You see he came down here to board one summer and that is how he came to be acquainted with her."

"Then, after they were married, he bought a place up on the Sound shore at Smithtown, and there Katherine was born; but her mother only lived a week or two after the birth of the child, and that kinder made Blarcomb disgusted with the Smithtown place, so he shut it up and went to live in New York, leaving the baby to the care of his wife's folks down here."

"Then came the smash-up and John Alexander took French leave, and nobody has ever seen or heard of him since."

"You are wrong there, for I met him in the West; he died only a few days ago, and I have come to bring to his daughter the particulars of his death."

"You don't say!" cried the station-master in amazement. "And did you come from 'way out West?"

"Yes."

"Did you know Blarcomb's brother George?"

"No."

"Strange you didn't meet him, for he has just come home from 'way out there somewhere," the old man remarked, speaking as though the "West" was like a small hamlet, where people would be likely to encounter one another.

"The West is a pretty big country."

"He's from Californy—been a miner and come home rich, and he is going to take care of Katherine now; jest like a play, you know, his coming, for no one had any idee that there was sich a man as George Blarcomb."

"You see, he ran away from home when he was a boy—went to Californy, and stuck there until he made his fortin', and now he's come East to enjoy it."

"I calculate that Kate was a mighty astonished girl when this uncle turned up."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE UNCLE.

A SUDDEN suspicion had taken possession of the half-breed detective's mind as he listened to the words of the station-master.

"What sort of a looking man is this George Blarcomb?" he asked.

"Nice-looking chap, with jet-black hair and a short beard, but I calculate that both on 'em are dyed, for he ain't no chicken; and he's got an easy sort of a way with him more like a

dominie than a man who has been leading a rough and tumble life in the mines for nigh onto forty years."

The suspicion of the half-breed detective had now become a certainty.

"I would like to see him, perhaps I may have run across him somewhere. It seems to me that I have met a man who answers to the description. Is he in town now?"

"Oh, no, he has taken Kate and gone to live in the house at Smithtown. You see, the property was in Mrs. Blarcomb's name, so the bank folks couldn't touch it when the smash-up came.

"It has been rented furnished every summer, and has helped to support the girl.

"There wasn't any tenant in it now, and Mr. George Blarcomb said he would like to live for a while in the house where his unfortunate brother must have passed so many happy hours."

"Ah, yes, I see, very natural," and the half-breed detective expressed his exact thoughts when he made the remark, but he did not explain *why* he thought it was natural.

"So, if you want to see Miss Kate, you will have to drive over to Smithtown—I can get you a horse and buggy at the store."

"No, thank you, I will go back and go by train."

The Westerner had studied his map, so that he had a pretty good idea of the lay of the land.

And now that he had secured such important information, he judged that it would be wise to consult the chief of police.

The next train carried him back to the city, where he arrived just as the shades of night commenced to gather, and he hurried at once to the Metropolitan Police Headquarters.

The superintendent was at his desk and the half-breed detective was at once admitted.

The chief listened attentively to Cool Colorado's recital, and when it was finished he brought his hand emphatically down upon the desk.

"I do not think there is the least doubt in the world but what you have bagged your game!" he exclaimed.

"This George Blarcomb is the man you want, and there is some deep purpose in his desire to be domiciled in the old residence of John Alexander Blarcomb.

"That is exactly what I think."

"The boodle that Blarcomb carried away with him—the sixty thousand dollars' worth of securities, were never recovered or heard of—now wouldn't it be a joke if the plunder was hidden away somewhere in that Smithtown house, and been there all these years, Blarcomb either being afraid to come East after it, or else conscience-stricken, not wishing to handle it?"

"The confession which he made, and wanted me to take care of, would look as if he repented and was going to restore the money to the rightful owners."

"So it does, and that confession, falling into the hands of the man who murdered him, suggested this bogus uncle business, though why the fellow wanted to bother with the girl at all is a mystery, for he might have gone and hired the house and then searched for the boodle at his leisure."

"I suppose we better not lose any time," Cool Colorado suggested, "and so we ought to take the first train in the morning."

"Oh, no!" the chief exclaimed, "we will not wait for morning. We will hire a special to-night. When we get after a regular high toby gentleman of this kind we mustn't lose any time, or our game will be off."

"I'll send a couple of my best men with you, and, by the way, allow me to congratulate you upon the manner in which you have worked up this case. It is as pretty a hit in the detective line as I have seen lately, and if you ever want a job come to me, and I will make room for you on my staff!"

Cool Colorado thanked the official and an hour later, in company with two of the crack New York detectives, was in a special train, waking the night echoes on the Long Island road.

Smithtown was reached in due time, a coach procured, for at the station they ascertained that the house was some distance off, and in due time they arrived.

The servant who answered their ring at the door said that Mr. George Blarcomb was at home, and she would call him.

But as the girl went on her mission, the invaders, with noiseless steps, followed her, and when she opened the door of the parlor, where the gentleman, in company with Kate Blarcomb, sat reading, and announced that some gentlemen wanted to see him, the three pushed right by the girl and entered the room.

The man sprung to his feet and thrust his

hand behind him as if to draw a weapon, but the half-breed detective, who was in the advance, was ready for such a movement, and he had the other "covered" with a cocked revolver in a twinkling.

"Don't try that game!" he cried, "or it will be the worse for you."

"How dare you intrude into my house in this manner?" cried the other, endeavoring to assume a defiant air, although his face was white and his hands trembled.

He had recognized the half-breed.

And Cool Colorado knew him too, although he had materially altered his appearance by dyeing his hair and beard.

"The game is up, Captain Nick Spader. I arrest you for murder!" the half-breed detective cried.

And then, almost before the man knew what they were about, the detectives had the handcuffs upon his wrists, and "went through" his pockets.

In one of them the written confession of the murdered miner was found.

As the sleuth-hounds had anticipated, the erring man had concealed his plunder in the house. The confession told where it was hidden and begged that it be restored to the rightful owners.

"The jig is up!" Old Nick cried, defiantly. "And I could have got away with the boodle, too, if the insane idea had not taken possession of me to sink my past life and lead an honest one under another name. So much for a man being false to his record!"

The detectives bore the prisoner away, leaving Cool Colorado to console the amazed Kate, who was a pretty young woman of two and twenty.

Deep was her sorrow for the death of her wayward father, and great her interest when the half-breed detective revealed to her that she was the heiress of a small fortune, for she was engaged to be married to a worthy young man, and the ceremony only waited until he could be established in business.

In the morning our hero returned to New York and made his report to the chief of police; imagine Cool Colorado's astonishment, though, to learn that the detectives, with all their skill, had not succeeded in bringing their prisoner to the city.

On the ferry-boat, just as she was running into her slip, the officers, with their prisoner, being outside, the desperado, with a sudden spring, leaped overboard, handcuffed as he was.

The tide was on the ebb, and running seaward almost with the speed of a mill-race.

Old Nick was never seen after he disappeared beneath the waters, and although a careful search was made, no trace of him was ever discovered. It was conjectured that he had been struck by the boat's wheel and instantly killed.

Our tale is told.

THE END.

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